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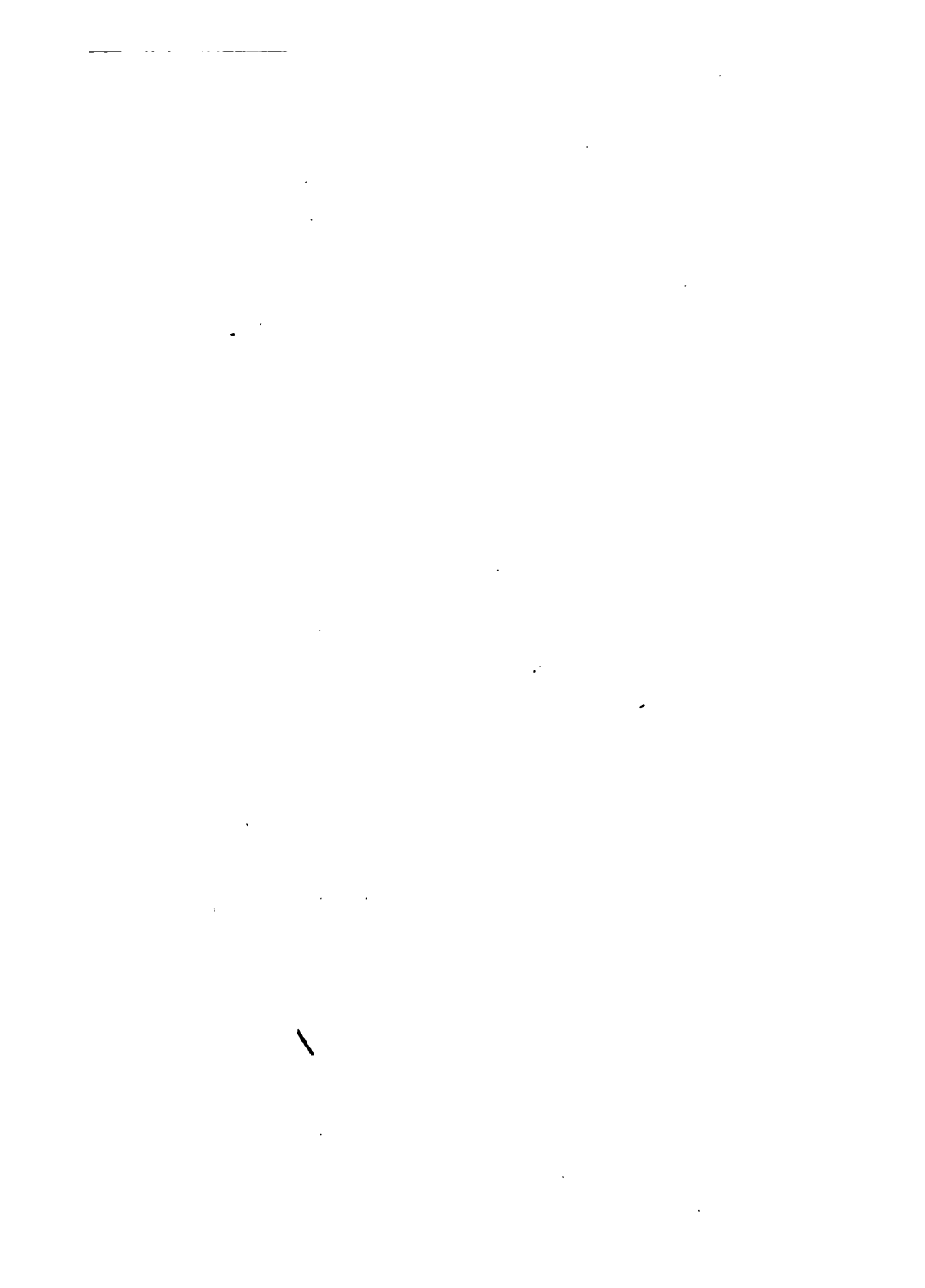
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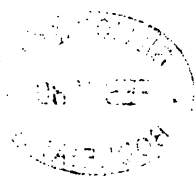
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SEBASTIAN STROME



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SEBASTIAN STROME.

A Novel.

BY

JULIAN HAWTHORNE,

AUTHOR OF 'GARTH,' 'ARCHIBALD MALMAISON,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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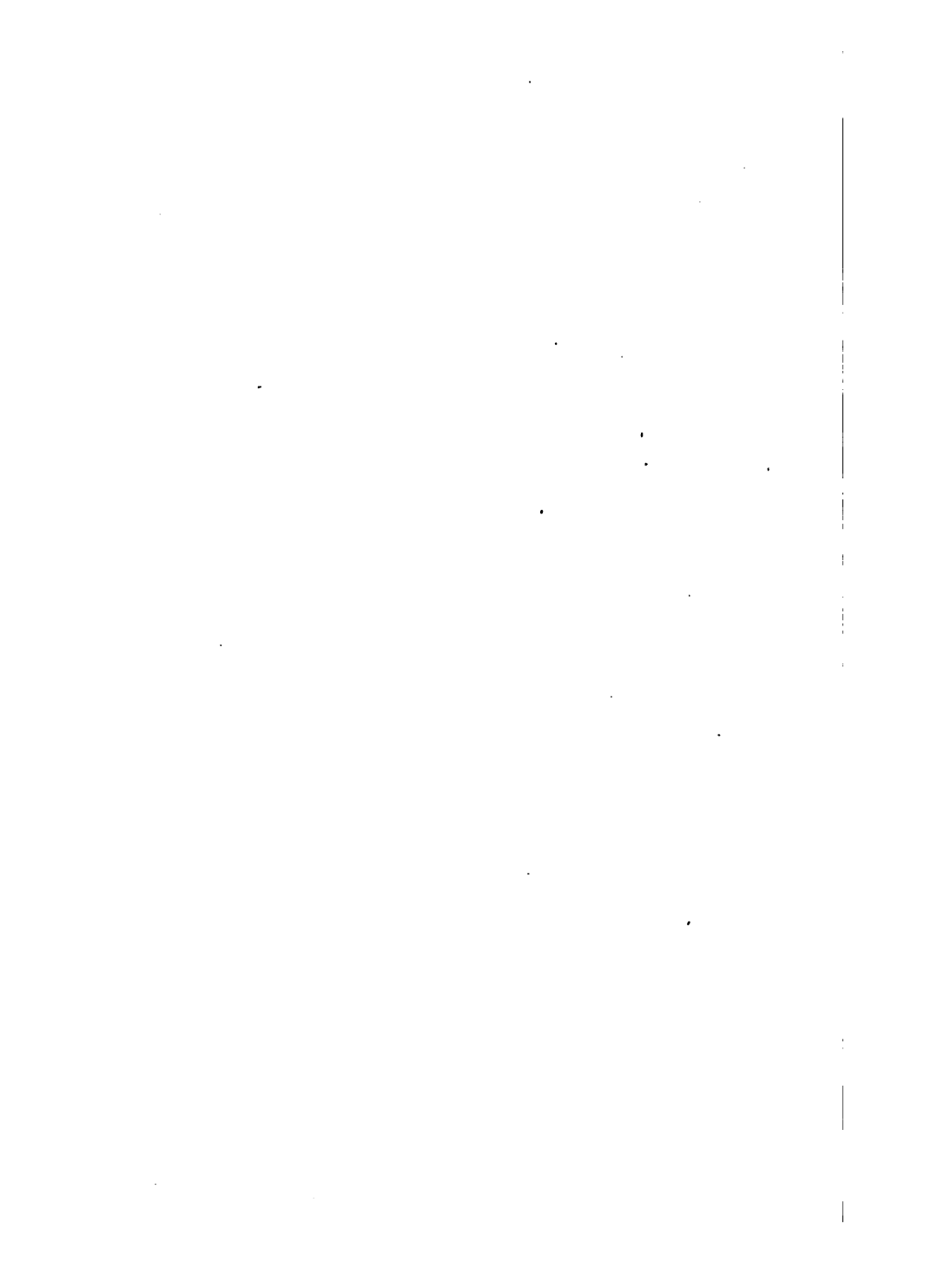
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SEBASTIAN STROME.

CHAPTER I.

AUCTIONEERING.

WHAT, then, was the cause of Sebastian's failure to appear, as he had promised to do, at the wedding, and denounce the bridegroom before the assembly?

Before approaching that question, we shall have lightly to trace his history from his father's funeral. It will be remembered that on coming to Cedarhurst the night of his father's death, he left Smillet in charge of his furniture and belongings, with instructions to

hold an auction at the earliest day possible, and reduce them to cash. Now, if he had gone over the whole list of his friends and acquaintances, with a view to selecting the one best fitted to carry out precisely this undertaking, he could not have hit upon another man in every respect so suitable as Smillet. Smillet entered upon the work with zeal, energy, and circumspection. At the outset he resolved upon two things : first, that the sale should be a success ; and secondly, that he would not buy so much as a single 'lot' himself. This latter resolution is worth noting, as exhibiting a most commendable and indeed heroic self-denial on Smillet's part. For nothing would have pleased him so much as to buy in the entire contents of the rooms at three times their actual value, and to present the proceeds to Strome as a slight testimonial of his esteem. But knowing as he did that such a course would be galling to Strome's theory of independence, and being unwilling to back up his action by telling lies about it, he made up his mind

that the transaction should be so fair and square that, though his friend were ten times as sensitive as he was, it should be impossible for him to take exception to it.

He began by taking out an auctioneer's licence. Having thus qualified himself for action, he engaged the services of an enlightened and humane appraiser, and shut himself up with him in Strome's rooms, together with a couple of blank books and a capital luncheon in a covered basket. They went over every article in the rooms, pasted labels on them, and entered them in catalogue; and Smillet furthermore appended to each lot, in his private note-book, the highest money values which the appraiser's conscience would permit him to assign them. The work lasted, with reasonable intermissions for refreshment, from ten in the morning until seven at night, when Smillet paid the appraiser, dismissed him, and conscientiously put the amount paid on the debit side of Strome's account. On casting up the total of the sums for which the things had been

appraised, he was gratified to find that it already showed somewhat larger than he had ventured to expect.

He now took his catalogue to the printer's, and by noon of the next day he had six hundred copies struck off. A circular was also printed, containing an original and highly stimulating address, in which the attractions of the sale were set forth in glowing language, and it was ingenuously stated that Mr. Smillet himself, whose social popularity was too widespread and well-founded to require mention, would himself officiate at the auctioneer's desk. These catalogues and circulars were despatched through the post to their various addresses; and it is not too much to say that they created a positive sensation in London. It was the Christmas holidays, everybody was in town, and in need of a sensation: what could be more novel and piquant than this? Moreover, Smillet's personal acquaintance in the London fashionable world was exceptionally extensive; and during the interval which had to elapse between the

dissemination of the circulars and the holding of the auction, he made it his business to call upon every soul he knew, to drag in the topic of the said auction by the head and ears, and not to relinquish it until he had extorted a solemn promise on the interlocutor's part to be present at it with money in his pocket. Throughout, he made a great mystery of the name of the gentleman on whose behalf the sale was held; and this mystery, while it enhanced the general curiosity and excitement, had the additional advantage of sparing Strome a rather ungainly sort of publicity; for very few people had known where Strome lived, and they were not among the number who were likely to attend the sale.

When the great day came, the sun, as if to show his approval of the proceeding, made a great effort, and precisely at twelve o'clock poked his kind countenance through the mephitic London vapours, and kept it in sight for two mortal hours. This gallant deed did not pass unrecognised: convinced

that so singular a meteorological phenomenon must forebode a memorable auction, the invited guests presented themselves at Mrs. Blister's unassuming doorway in such numbers, and with such splendour of holiday attire, and rumbling of fashionable carriage-wheels, that the good woman fell into a kind of sibilant ecstasy; and finally retired to Mrs. Bartlet's, and there held forth concerning the beau monde, the uncertainty of human life, and the comparative merits of gin sweet and unsweetened gin, until the shadows of night had fallen, and the famous auction had been for many hours a thing of the past.

It was a triumphant success in every way. Smillet's appearance and performance as auctioneer was so enormously diverting—and at the same time his acuteness and self-possession were so far beyond what anybody was prepared for—that the contention seemed to be who should bid and overbid the highest for things, the chief merit of which, after all allowances had been made, lay in the absurd eloquence with which Smillet recommended

them. The lots were all sold out in less than a couple of hours ; and the auctioneer found himself in possession of a sum of money which, after all the expenses incident to the enterprise had been met, all tradesmen's claims against Strome settled, and Smillet's own advance to the latter of fifty pounds repaid, left money enough to buy back the entire property at the price which Strome had originally given for it.

As for that fifty-pound loan, Smillet was in hopes that his friend would have forgotten all about it. It had been proffered and accepted at a moment when Strome, half delirious with excitement, long fasting, and the shock of the news about Fanny Jackson and his father, had scarcely known what he was doing ; and Smillet, in taking advantage of his unusual docility to foist the money upon him, had hoped that the whole transaction might have escaped his memory. But in this hope he was disappointed : Strome remembered very well ; and when he came up to London, a few days after the sale was

over, and stopped over-night at Smillet's rooms, he discharged the debt, with an expression of gratitude so emphatic as to cause his benefactor to redden uncomfortably, and to take himself to task for not having managed matters better. The idea that so great a man as Strome should imagine that so insignificant a man as Smillet could really do anything deserving of his gratitude, made Smillet feel like a sort of impostor. The utmost that he could do must, in the nature of things, fall short of what ought to be done. Smillet was by no means lacking in self-conceit of a certain sort; but it never took the form of claiming merit for deeds which he considered incumbent upon him from the social, and especially from the friendly standpoint. In the latter case, though he should strain every nerve, yet being Smillet, he must necessarily fail of fully accomplishing his aim. Men of Smillet's stamp are useful to fill the gap left by those superior spirits who consider it sufficient to have an aim, but supererogatory to realise it.

‘And what are you going to do now?’ Smillet had inquired, after business matters had been disposed of. ‘Shall you marry before entering the Church?’ For he knew nothing of his friend’s hidden history.

‘I’m not going to marry at all,’ Strome replied; and then, in answer to his hearer’s exclamations, he told him the whole shameful story.

As Smillet listened, he reddened up to the roots of his hair; his eyes sought the floor; once in a while he glanced up at the speaker with an appalled, deprecatory look. When Strome had concluded, which he did with a feeling of dull forlornness, not finding himself so stoical as to be indifferent to the loss even of Smillet’s respect—the latter began to wink and to gulp, and finally plumped his face down upon his arms on the table, and for some time gave out no articulate utterance. Strome, thinking that he might as well take his departure, was getting up from his chair with that purpose in view; but Smillet thereupon raised his head, and blurted out: ‘Don’t

go!' Then he rubbed his eyeglass diligently on the skirt of his coat, stuck it in his eye, and said :

' Oh, Strome ! I'd rather have done it myself !'

' Good heavens !' Strome murmured.

Even if the affair had been none of his, he could not have smiled at the uncouth, naïve self-abnegation of that saying. It was spoken from a higher level than he had ever reached. In fact, it so vividly revealed to him his inferiority that he was afraid to make any remark about it, lest he should shock Smillet by some involuntary coarseness. Really, he was hardly fit to sit and talk familiarly with a man who could utter such a thing as that, and be unconscious of having said anything remarkable !

' But what shall you do ?' Smillet finally inquired.

' Well, I'll tell you. I am going among my like. I'm not at home here. There are people in London who will suit me better. I don't mean to say that they would not have

made better use than I've done of the opportunities I have had ; but their atmosphere will be easier to breathe. I shall live where Fanny would have lived, if she had gone on the road on which I started her. She was more my wife than any other woman will ever be, and I shall take my cue from that. From henceforth I have no business west of Aldgate.'

'Do you mean to say,' cried Smillet, in tones creaking with dismay, 'that you are going to give it up? You don't mean you are going to the—to——'

'To the devil?' supplied Strome, smiling a little, and glad to smile; 'well, not exactly—at least in the ordinary sense of the phrase. I am going to the devil, inasmuch as I suppose his satanic majesty lives in Whitechapel as much as in other places; but not with the intention of putting my services at his disposal. I'm going there because it may be considered as at the bottom of things, or pretty near it; and it's at the bottom that I wish to begin, but I mean to do the best I can there;

that is, I mean neither to steal, murder, nor commit adultery; but to work for my living, and to take care of my baby.'

'But what can you—are you going to preach to them?'

'No; not even on the text of myself.'

'Of all men in the world, you are the last one I should think could stand that sort of thing,' Smillet said after a pause. 'You are the most fastidious fellow I know. How are you going to put up with dirt and bad smells, and drunken neighbours and rows? Oh, I say, Strome, it won't do! And with a baby, too!'

'You must understand that I am no apostle going to redeem the heathen; but one of the heathen themselves—only, one who is convinced of the practical expediency of decent and law-abiding conduct. It is very possible that I may come to lose that conviction; if so, all I have to say is, I shall be in a truer position than I'm in now—I shall know how much of me is genuine, and how much is humbug. And the utmost I

expect is, that what there is genuine in me will speak for itself, and attract its like. Meantime, I shan't put on any airs.'

'How long are you going to keep this up?'

'As long as I see anything in the people I am with that reminds me of anything I have seen in myself. And if I ever come out, it will only be when I can bring along with me some man who has deserved rescue less than I have, and who nevertheless wishes it more. That will not be for some time, Smillet.'

'But look here, Strome, if you are really going in for this sort of thing, why not get ordained first? You would have ever so much more influence over the people.'

'In the first place, why should I have any influence? What business have I to suppose that any influence I could exercise would be wholesome? But that isn't all; I don't care to discuss the subject; but the fact is I have no belief that would authorise me to get ordained, even assuming that any bishop would

consent to ordain me. It seems to me that men are put into the world and then left to do the best they can for themselves—without any heavenly assistance. If any of my heathen friends were to come to me for religious consolation, that is all I should be able to tell him—and that would not consort very well with a cassock and a white choker. So I shall be better as I am.'

'You will live in respectable lodgings, anyway,' Smillet said, brightening up a little after a period of sombre meditation. 'You can live like a prince, in that region, on the interest of five hundred pounds. And I shall be able to drop in and see you every few days——'

'No, you won't!' interposed the other, bringing his hands down slowly on the arms of his chair, and grasping them firmly. 'No one I have ever known will know where to find me, and if they did, they would not find me companionable. I have promised to write regularly to my mother, but she will not know where the letters are written, and I

shall get no answers to them. As for the five hundred pounds, I shan't touch it. I am going to support myself, or have no support. In the latter case, the money will be for the baby, after I am out of the way. No, I'm going to play fair, and take my chances with the rest. To be sure, I shall have the advantage of a liberal education—and I shall be curious to see how much that will be worth! Now, Smillet old fellow, I have told you more than I have told any one else. There are some things about you which make me think more highly of you than of any other man I know who is living now—a fact which you will never be able to comprehend as long as you live. But what I have told you is in confidence, and I wish you to say nothing about it. I am going to be buried, and I wish the funeral to be strictly private, and the grave unmolested. Well, I must be off. Good-night, Smillet !'

Smillet did not ask his friend to stop a little longer : both of them being Englishmen, they tacitly understood that the conver-

sation had got to a point beyond which it ought not to go. Smillet, indeed, had already manifested more emotion than strict good form allowed. When Strome arose, therefore, he also got to his feet, and followed him in silence to the door, where they faced one another for the last time, and each squeezed the other's hand very hard. Smillet wished to say a parting word, but he thought he should not be able to manage more than a simple 'Good-bye.' However, when he had got this out, in rather an uncertain squeak, he managed to add the following : ' And I can tell you, Strome, this will make a big difference in me !' But to any elucidation of this arcanum he was unequal.

Strome walked down the street with a heavy step, feeling that he had separated himself finally from his half of the world, and that henceforth he was to enjoy whatever satisfaction there might be in never pretending to be any better than he really was. And yet he had hardly turned the corner into Piccadilly when he met a handsome young

fellow, exquisitely dressed, whom he had known in Berlin as an attaché of the embassy there; and this budding diplomatist, who had arrived only the day before from Europe, greeted Strome with most elegant cordiality, asked after his health and prosperity in cheerfulest accents, and entreated him to come down to Greenwich and dine with him and a nice set of fellows at the Trafalgar. Strome was half tempted to fall in with the grim humour of this idea; besides, it was singularly pleasant to be treated so much above his deserts. For a moment he thought, 'Why not take everything that has happened as a dream, which in a certain sense it is, and live on the fat of the land for eight hours more!' He declined the invitation, however, told a dozen white lies with all his customary grace, held his cordial acquaintance's kid-gloved hand in his own for an instant, and then they parted with smiles. Strome walked on, without further adventures, and was soon beyond the furthest limits of the fashionable world, wherein for

some years he had cut no inconsiderable figure. It remained to be seen what sort of a figure he would cut east of Aldgate.

What he had said to Smillet was no more than the truth—that to no one else had he confided so much of his intentions. But it may fairly be doubted whether he could have cut himself adrift with that confidence unmade. Men are curiously dependent upon each other, even when they most fancy the opposite ; not least so men like Strome, who inevitably occupy a large place in their own regard : not necessarily a favourable place, but still a large one. Strome was very independent, in the ordinary sense of the word : but he was too self-conscious, too affected, too much in the habit of thinking about his appearance in other people's eyes, to have been capable of taking this plunge without posing for a moment before somebody. Who that somebody was would make little difference, provided only he were a part of the life that was left behind. This weakness can hardly be deemed discreditable — it is too

pathetic for that ; and so common to human nature, that probably no human being would commit suicide in the face of an absolute certainty that no other human being would ever know the deed had been done.



CHAPTER II.

NEW QUARTERS.



E this as it may, Strome was now fairly at grips with his new existence. He must have known that the step he had taken was a desperate one, something more than audacious ; and he may have allowed this perception to flatter his self-esteem. He could imagine people saying, 'Who but Strome would ever have dreamed of doing such a thing !' A cat has nine lives, but self-esteem is livelier than a hydra. At the same time it is impossible that he should have fully realised, stretch his imagination how he might, what the actual

conditions and sensations of a Whitechapel life would be. Who can realise all the loathsome, stifling, insane, stupid hideousness of life in a London slum? Not, certainly, those whom curiosity urges to pass through Houndsditch or Flower-and-Dean Street in company with a policeman. Not, certainly, those benevolent and most praiseworthy men and women who visit the slums for charitable purposes, who institute schools or refuges in their midst, and who, perhaps, spend most of their time in conducting or overseeing the latter. Not even those enterprising spirits who actually take up their lodging in the slum itself—eat there, and sleep there, and derive their wardrobe from a seventh-hand slop-shop, and so remain for weeks together, or it may be for months, or perhaps for a year; and, when they come out, write a thrilling book about their experiences—not even these persons have any notion of what life is in a London slum. There is only one way to find out what that is; you must go there, not out of curiosity, nor for charity's

sake, nor in order to write a book ; but because the slum is your home ; and having made it your home, you must also feel that it will always remain your home ; and, in short, that you could not get out again, no matter how much you might desire to do so, but that as you have lived there, so you will die there, and nobody be the wiser or the sorrier, though perhaps some few might be the happier, and take occasion to remark that it would have been a saving of trouble if you had died before, and that as for your corpse, it is a nuisance. When you have done this, then you will have a fair notion of what life is like in a London slum ; but even then you must hide your diminished head before your neighbour who was born as well as lived and died there. He and he only is in complete possession of the facts ; but he will never communicate them to any one else, for they are incommunicable, and it is a very good thing that they are so.

Such being the present writer's view of this matter, the reader will understand that no

harrowing descriptions of life in a London slum are to be looked for in this book. It is to be observed, moreover, that Strome, in spite of what he had said about his resolution to 'play fair,' could not in the nature of things, and with the best will in the world, fully act up to his assertion. Not only was he unable to be born in Spitalfields, but he could not live there without the consciousness that he might stop living there whenever he pleased. It is all very well to make vows—nay, to keep them when made; but it is quite another thing to be in a position where vows do not signify either one way or the other. There is an ancient story of an old man, an inhabitant of Milan, who for sixty years had never happened to go outside the city walls. The duke, being informed of this, thereupon decreed that what he had refrained from doing so long of his own free will, he should thenceforth be restrained from doing whether he willed it or not. 'Whereat,' saith the chronicler, 'he, though never before having wished to go forth, soon died of grief at

being denied his liberty.' And thus Strome, in taking up his residence in a villanous quarter of the world's capital, was in great measure moved so to do by the very fact that the deed was a voluntary one. Whatever pain he might suffer, whatever degradation he might undergo, he would always be able to say—he never could help saying: 'This need not have been had I willed otherwise.' And although this was no fault of his, and although the life he had chosen was unlovely enough on the best of terms, he must still retain herein an indefinite advantage over his fellows who could not help themselves. On the other hand, it is to be remembered that, deprived of this advantage, he would also have missed the moral discipline to obtain which seems to have been the immediate cause of his action. Had his position been involuntary, all his energies would have been directed to escaping from it, or raging against it, instead of turning it to the profit of his moral man.

We are not then, to return to the point,

required to contemplate a life-like picture of Spitalfields and such like places, but at most to bear in mind that they formed Strome's environment at this epoch : that he was subjected to their influences ; that disease, theft, murder, filth, and fornication were his neighbours, if not his inmates ; that he was beset by all ugly sights, sounds, and deeds ; that nearly everything that makes outward existence pleasant was away from him. When it is considered that he was a young man of particularly refined taste in most matters, very fond of æsthetic delights, and alive to delicate sensuous impressions ; predisposed, moreover, to the higher intellectual pursuits, to witty and pregnant conversation, to the contact of cultivated minds : in short, when we reflect how grotesque and monstrous was the abhorrence of the life he was now about to lead from that he had led hitherto, we shall perhaps see how it was that he imagined himself to be doing a rather extraordinary thing, if not a thing involving a certain amount of saturnine grandeur and heroism.

Yes; for though Sebastian Strome had passed beyond Aldgate, and pitched his tent in an inferior sort of pandemonium, and left behind him most of what had constituted his former life, there was one thing which still stuck to him as closely as ever; and that was a marked interest in the thoughts and acts of Sebastian Strome, and a species of admiration for them.

What was his object in going to pandemonium? Is the explanation of his motives, as given by him to Smillet, to be taken as true, and the whole truth? He talked well on that occasion, and made out a tolerably good case, almost a suspiciously good one. But do people, as a matter of fact, ever proceed upon such sternly unhopeful and self-mortifying principles as he then professed? Did he really look upon himself as the moral inferior of the worst of the criminal classes? Did he honestly believe that God, having snared mankind in the net of the flesh, leaves them to wriggle there without further concern for them? And if so, did not that

belief invalidate the logic of his argument? Had he, in truth, no aspiration to do good, but at most some purpose not to do evil? Was his sense of eternal justice satisfied by simply uniting himself with the rank of life which he had sinned into? That may be dignified, impressive, Byronic—but is it genuine? Had Strome no sneaking expectation of becoming a sort of apostle after all? He had read and heard, doubtless, that amongst the vices of the poor and criminal classes, veins of strange virtue are sometimes found and brought to light: did he not look forward to cultivating these virtuous veins of theirs, and constituting himself a sort of centre of illumination in their midst? In brief, was he not making a solemn fool of himself? It seems necessary to make these painful inquiries because, although Strome has hitherto been allowed in great measure to tell his own story, and draw his own likeness, it has now become desirable to look at him from an independent point of view. It is time to consider whether he retained, in the privacy of

his secret meditations, that proud and severe demeanour which he presented to his friends; whether his stoical composure in doing unprecedented things were anything more than histrionic eccentricity; whether, in fine, a truly sincere man would not have hit upon some less strained and conspicuous method of making atonement. For atonement was no doubt Strome's object—that, and the desire to render himself less unworthy to be named as his father's son. But to invite disagreeable or intolerable circumstances is not necessarily atonement; a man need not be repentant though he lash himself with a cat-o'-nine-tails; and Sebastian could not rise to his father's level by any such rough-and-ready expedient as that of living amongst people who could have no intellectual sympathy with him. But might not he and they sympathise with one another—on other than intellectual grounds—on the broad ground of their human kinship? It cannot be denied that such a sympathy may exist, but not for one who is a sceptic. Such a

sympathy, if it be genuine and not factitious, postulates the recognition of the essential brotherhood of man; and the essential brotherhood of man postulates the Divine Humanity. Now Sebastian professed not to believe in the Divine Humanity.

Well, at all events, here was Sebastian in pandemonium, and, being there, there was a fair probability that there he would stay; not so much from the principle of inertia, as because the pride of human consistency—the most irrational and illusory of all forms of pride—would tend to keep him there long after his heart and mind were sick of it. And as against this pride of human consistency, which has sometimes led men to commit murder lest they should endanger their chances of going to heaven by breaking the oath they had sworn to commit it—as against this, what was there? Well, not much of anything, unless it were accident—and the baby!

To do him justice, Sebastian was not quite consistent enough to choose his lodgings in

the very most loathsome part of pandemonium ; on the contrary, they cost him no less than five shillings and sixpence a week, and consisted of a second-floor room sixteen feet by twelve, opening into a smaller room twelve feet by six. Each of these rooms had a window which looked out, not upon an enclosed court, but upon the street itself. The neighbourhood was unquestionably a very low neighbourhood, inhabited by persons who were not likely to change essentially either in character or aspect after they had reached their final abiding-place beyond the grave ; but these apartments of Strome's were among the best and airiest that the neighbourhood afforded ; on certain days in summer, in favourable years, the sunshine was said sometimes to touch the summit of one of the tumble-down chimneys on the roof overhead. Why did Strome occupy these aristocratic quarters instead of living in the cellar below—as he could legally have done in the year 1855—where he might have breathed the aroma of a cesspool all the day

round, shovelled out the dead rats and other vermin every Sunday, or whenever an exceptional rage for cleanliness possessed him; and every evening studied the phenomena of male and female bodies rendered insensible by drunkenness or violence, and falling through the oblong hole in the pavement of the court which served him as a doorway? Why not take advantage of the superior opportunities of atonement offered by the cellar? Surely this was not consistency: neither, on the other hand, was it accident; we are, therefore, driven to the conclusion that it must have been the baby. The baby, then, was already beginning to make its voice heard in the conduct of the new life. Would its influence be deleterious or otherwise?

Strome deposited his fashionable wardrobe at the nearest pawnbroker's, retaining only one very threadbare suit, which he proposed to wear when business should call him away from his immediate neighbourhood. For the rest he attired himself in the cast-off garments of a defunct sailor, which he pur-

chased at the slop-shop for two shillings and sixpence. His furniture consisted of a table and chair and a straw mattress, and for the baby a crib, which was placed in the little side room. He had a pot for boiling meat and potatoes, and a skillet to heat milk for the baby. Altogether an economical and practical outfit which, moreover, cost comparatively little; but it should be mentioned that Strome, when putting the five hundred pounds into the bank for the benefit of the baby, had reserved a matter of ten pounds for himself. This sum he resolved should be the only money not earned by his own labour that should stand between him and starvation. If that went before more could be made to put in its place, then the baby should be put forthwith into the enjoyment of its modest fortune; but as for Sebastian, he would simply go back to his second-floor front apartments and there remain until it should be necessary for the landlord to have his corpse removed. Sebastian was determined to be independent, and possibly heroic likewise.

But what profession did he propose to follow, and by dint thereof to keep his ten pounds from melting into nothing? Was it the profession of propagandist of the Church of Rome—a profession which is popularly supposed to be adequately paid, and for the exercise of which there was, it is easy to believe, an ample field in the neighbourhood which he had chosen for his habitation? We have heard Sebastian express a liking for the Roman system, and assert some disposition to avail himself of its advantages. No; he had no present intention of becoming a propagandist of the Church of Rome. It could not be because he had no faith in the religion; he had never professed to have any faith in it in the ordinary sense of the word, nor, for that matter, to have faith in any religion whatever. He had intended to take it up merely as an agreeable method of killing time, and of gratifying a cynical personal ambition. Well, at what period of his life could he expect to have more need of killing time agreeably than at the present? Could

it be that he had ceased to think that a cynical personal ambition was worth gratifying? Or could it be that he found propagandism incompatible with the claims of the baby? At all events, he does not seem to have entertained any idea of treating the Roman Catholic Church to any portion either of his five hundred pounds or of his time; and men must be judged by their acts when there is nothing better to judge them by. The profession that Sebastian chose to follow might perhaps be more accurately termed a trade—the trade of carving in wood.

The following of this trade would not necessitate his leaving his room, except occasionally to carry his work to the firm that employed him; therefore he would be able to keep an eye on the baby. He had reserved his tools from the auction sale of his property; they took up very little room, and he worked at his table in the window. Before hiring his lodgings east of Aldgate he had presented himself at a certain shop in the city with a specimen of his work, and had arranged with

the master of the shop for a supply of the like articles at a moderate rate of remuneration, it is true, but still sufficient to maintain a family of two whose rent was but five shillings and sixpence a week, and whose chief expense beyond this was for a daily supply of fresh milk for the baby. So Sebastian sat at his table day after day, and on Sundays the same as other days, and carved boxes, and candlesticks, and card-racks, and brackets, and bookstands out of wood, and sold them for enough to pay the rent and the milkman's bill and one or two other things, and kept an eye upon the baby, who, strange to tell, thrived very well in this unfashionable quarter of the town. Matters went on in this prosperous manner for three or four months, and no adventures worth recording took place, although things happened every day and night which might have been looked upon as adventures in a less unfashionable quarter of the town ; and on April Fool's Day a gentleman who sold matches was murdered in the doorway of the house adjoining Strome's, and the

noise, which unfortunately is usually inseparable from such transactions, woke up Strome's baby and made it cry. Nevertheless the baby throve, and conducted itself with the despotic dependence normal to persons of its age in all ranks of life. Strome did not thrive quite so well, but he did not get murdered, nor even become involved in any serious quarrel with anybody. Nobody took much notice of him : and, in fact, he was not quite so noticeable a man, with his beard grown and clad in the defunct sailor's garments, as he had been at the time of our first acquaintance with him. He worked much, and perhaps thought much, though of that we have no certain knowledge, for he spoke little to any one except the baby. At length a day arrived when he knew that Selim Fawley was going to marry Mary Dene.

Sebastian entrusted the baby to the care of a woman who lived on the same floor, and whose character need not be too closely inquired into ; but she had long been fond of

the baby. He put on his best clothes and called on Fawley, with what result we have heard. What had been done to the baby while he was away will never be known ; but that night it was taken ill, and it remained ill for many days. At the hour when Mary Dene was being made the wife of Selim Fawley, Sebastian was sitting with the baby in his arms and much misery in his heart. He could not leave it, even to save Mary. No ; he could not leave it. But oh, the rage and misery in his heart !



CHAPTER III.

INDEPENDENCE.



HIS painful division of mind between the baby's welfare and Mary's was not a thing that Sebastian could have foreseen; and it gave him food for reflection. Why should he particularly care what happened to Mary Dene? Of course he esteemed, respected, and admired her; but we esteem, respect, and admire many persons whose death or disaster affects us with nothing worse than a semi-agreeable titillation of curiosity or surprise. Now, to Sebastian, the idea of Mary marrying Fawley was all but intolerable; so nearly intolerable

that he could not contemplate it without rage and abhorrence. Was this jealousy? No; for Sebastian immediately thought of several men whom he could have seen Mary marry, with complete equanimity: besides, had he not dissolved the engagement between himself and her on the explicit ground that he did not care enough for her to make her his wife? It must, therefore, be Fawley's personal vileness, and unfitness for the honourable estate of marriage, that influenced him. But, again, Sebastian knew that Fawley might have married any other woman than this particular Mary Dene, and Sebastian would not have thought of interfering. Apparently, then, his feeling for her must be something more than ordinary respect, admiration, or esteem. What could this ambiguous feeling be?

Whatever it was, it had not been sufficiently powerful to induce him to leave the baby in the crisis of its illness in order to prevent the marriage: it had been only powerful enough to make his refraining from

so doing very painful. But did not this indicate an unexpectedly strong feeling for the baby? The baby was a baby, and he was its father; but it would seem, at first sight, as if his parental affection ought logically to be less rather than above the average. For the baby was, though innocently, the immediate cause of his social ruin. He could not love it for its mother's sake, for he had never loved its mother; she had but ministered to his selfish pleasure for a while: still less could he love it for his own sake, since it was the visible reminder of the most disastrous folly of his life; and finally, as to loving it for what it was in itself, that was the least logical alternative of all—for it was scarcely more than the germ of a human being, without character and without principles, and, what was more, without any noticeable personal attractions. How to explain why, for the sake of preserving this human germ from possible death, he had been willing to abandon Mary Dene to the certainty of a fate in comparison with which

death was a minor evil? Well, it was a mystery: one of those non-sequiturs to which men who regard life from such a philosophical stand-point as Sebastian Strome's are peculiarly exposed; and one of the penalties of indulgence in materialistic credulity.

His mystification may have been one reason why he speedily came to regard the baby as a wonder of the world—a being of miraculous attributes. Never having devoted any study to babies heretofore, he had no comparative data to go upon; it seemed to him that there was something supernatural about the little thing. The absence of speculation in its round grey eyes, the arbitrary and aimless gesticulations of its small hands and feet, its general lack of adjustment to earthly conditions—all seemed to mark it as a creature not originally intended to be human. The impossibility of foretelling what its line of action would be in any circumstances except those of hunger and of physical pain, rendered its every

manifestation profoundly interesting to him. When he had first looked forward to taking the entire charge of this baby, he had been chiefly impressed with the conviction that it would be an immense inconvenience; but inasmuch as he had embarked in the enterprise from a bare sentiment of obligation, this idea had rather stimulated him than otherwise. The unprecedented discovery that a baby could be something more or less than a nuisance, was somewhat bewildering; it necessitated an entire fresh focussing of his mental retina. Sebastian found none of the difficulty in the practical details of baby-management that embarrasses most men-nurses: he had always been singularly deft and capable with his hands; and his ways of moving were habitually quiet and gentle. His patience, in any undertaking that interested him, was practically inexhaustible; and a valuable sense of humour smoothed many passages that might otherwise have been trying. The baby, without directly expressing its appreciation of his way of

doing things, contrived to do so indirectly by dint of passionate expostulations against any one who attempted to act as his substitute. Sebastian was so acutely flattered by this evidence of partiality, that he could hardly keep himself from giving way to indecorous manifestations of triumph in the presence of those who were thus discomfited. He soon persuaded himself that the greatest favour he could confer upon a given person was to let that person hold the baby, or in any way contribute to its amusement. The woman who lived on the same floor, and to whom allusion has already been made, came in for the greater part of these favours up to the time of the baby's illness. She had once been an impulsive and soft-hearted Irish girl; she now resembled the baby in being devoid of character and principles; but she drank brandy instead of milk, and her complexion more resembled the outside of a conch-shell than the inside. A certain fitful and reckless tenderness nevertheless remained; she had once had a baby of her own; and sometimes,

without warning or introduction, she would burst out into an ungainly splutter of grief, accompanied with much rubbing of the eyes and nose, and indefinite bad language—generally ending by wagging her head ominously at vacancy, and saying in a menacing tone: ‘Well, never mind! it’s meself knows what it is!’ After she had made several appalling proposals to Sebastian, and he had answered them discreetly, the two became very good friends, and he placed great confidence in her; even going so far as to leave the baby in her charge on the occasion already mentioned. Nor did the ill-success of this experiment alienate his regard, it being evident enough that the baby’s illness was occasioned not by neglect, but by a mistaken zeal in the application of remedies against squalling. Of course he never allowed her to ‘look after’ the baby again, but the rupture of their friendly relations did not come until some time afterwards, and it was caused by his having interfered one night to prevent ‘her fellow’ from kick-

ing her to death. Kathleen never forgave this officiousness on Sebastian's part; and before he had time to appease her wrath, she was ejected by the landlord for failing to pay her rent, and was swallowed up somewhere in the muddy abyss without; Sebastian never saw her again.

Meanwhile the baby's illness cost Sebastian dear, in more senses than one. He had a doctor to see it, and every fresh prescription was a week's rent. His anxiety, not to speak of the necessity for constant watchfulness, left him little time for his carving, and he got behindhand with his orders. The ten pounds began to melt away. There was really nothing cheerful in the situation. It was sad to listen to the baby's moaning cries when it was awake; it was sad to watch its feverish cheeks and restless turnings when it was asleep; it was maddening to hear the coarse shouts and noises of indifferent people in the house or in the street—noises which might deprive the baby of essential rest. Miserable, too, was the reflection that the

money was going, and that no adequate provision was being made to supply the loss. Then Sebastian, pacing up and down the sixteen feet of narrow space, would ask himself whether he ought not to let the baby go—let it enjoy whatever benefits of air and quiet and attention its five hundred pounds could procure it: whether to keep it in that stifling room were not a kind of murder? And he would answer himself, with quick and heavy sighs: ‘Yes, yes, I must let it go, or else it will die: I must let it go, and die myself: if I love it, I must let it go!’ Then he would go and look at it as it lay there in its crib; and sometimes it would seem almost to return his look, and its little hand would tightly clasp his finger, and it would send forth a plaintive, inarticulate murmur. Then Sebastian would clench his teeth together and say: ‘I cannot let it go! I have a right to keep it. No one else knows how to love it. Little darling, I love you—stay with me!’ And he would go off and work at his carving with a sort of frenzy. But still the ten pounds

kept melting away, and he could not supply the loss.

When this had gone on for several weeks, the baby sometimes rallying a little, and then again falling away, Sebastian's aspect began to undergo a marked change. His cheeks became very hollow, and had an unhealthy pallor, rendered more conspicuous by contrast with the thick beard and the black mole under the left eye. The obliquity in his vision seemed to become greater; the hair on the top of his head thinned away more and more, until he was nearly bald. He had contracted a habit of muttering in an undertone to himself, giving his lips an odd, sinister movement. He looked like a man of forty, worn down by poverty and an evil conscience. In some of his moods his face was unpleasant to see; people began to avoid him; an Italian woman living in the same street affirmed that he had the evil eye. Nobody had comprehended him from the outset; he had rejected several eligible offers of a place in the criminal professions. What

did he want here? Made things out of wood, did he? Artistic carving was a branch of industry not appreciated in Spitalfields. Match-box making, or skinning cats alive, was a reasonable albeit poor-spirited alternative of burglary or pocket-picking; artistic carving was not. Perhaps this cove was a moucher come to spy out honest men's business. Perhaps he had better be requested to leave—the request to be supported by such arguments as his obstinacy might require. One night a raw-boned, gin-inflamed casuist crept up the stairs with an argument in his pocket in the shape of a three-pound slung-shot. He listened at the door of the queer cove's room: there was no sound. He opened the door cautiously, and cautiously turned on his dark lantern. A ghastly figure stood motionless and voiceless in the centre of the room, with a baby in its arms. A bloodless face was turned on the intruder; a red gleam seemed to issue from the strange hollow eyes. Here, evidently, was no living man, capable of understanding even slung-

shot arguments, but a spectre ; and a spectral baby into the bargain ! The enterprising casuist, his eyeballs fixed and his knees relaxed with terror, began to back away from this apparition : suddenly it vanished—that is to say, the door of the dark lantern closed unawares, leaving Sebastian in his original obscurity. The casuist, in dread lest some flank movement should be attempted, made one more step backwards, and fell from the top of the stairs to the bottom, where he remained undisturbed until the following morning. He was then picked up with a broken arm and a cracked skull, and an ineradicable conviction that a ghost had flung him downstairs. No one attempted to argue with the queer cove after this.

Sebastian, who had been engaged in no less material an action than that of lulling the baby to sleep, and who, having omitted to complete the furnishing of his establishment by the addition of a looking-glass, had no idea what an uncanny object he was, imagined that the intruder's discomfiture had been

effected by the baby; and from that time forth he looked upon this little mortal as a sort of supernatural buckler against harm. From loving it with a feverish energy, as the one thing with which he could hold communion, and in contemplating which he was in a measure raised above the sordid barrenness of his present life, he gradually came to adopt towards it an attitude of mind which might almost be described as one of worship: the baby became his religion. Such a religion, though it may have its moments of passionate sweetness, must of necessity debar its votary from all possibility of repose and peace; for the thing worshipped, being mortal, is subject to mortal accidents; and there is always the lurking dread lest the accident of death should remove it altogether. Meanwhile, however, it is certain that the baby was the animating principle of Sebastian's life; all his thoughts and actions owned that as their centre and end: and if he could only have loved it enough to be willing to give it up, it might have been the means of leading him

to a worship with which peace was less incompatible.

Sometimes, when his despair was very great, his pride would falter, and he would curse the folly that had betrayed him into a state of life which he lacked fortitude to sustain. And he would say to himself: 'I will be a fool no longer: what are vows and resolutions in comparison with my love for my baby? I will take the money and begin a new life with it—by writing for the reviews, or in a dozen other ways, I can make an income on which I could live in luxury, and bring up the baby like the lady she was meant to be. Why hasn't she as good a right to be a lady as a pauper? Isn't there as much in her of me as of her mother? If I am entangled with baseness, my duty is to raise myself and this innocent child above it, not to lower myself deliberately to a base level. When I first came here, I had made no reckoning with the baby, and I fancied I could give these human devils an example of an ideal moral life, and induce them to

imitate it; and so do some of the good my father expected of me. Little enough progress have I made so far; I am more likely to follow their example than they mine! Let me admit myself beaten, and give it up; my vows were made only to myself, and if I absolve myself, who can complain? I'll leave this to-morrow, and leave all insane theories along with it!

Nevertheless, when the morrow came, Sebastian remained. Perhaps the baby was a little better, or was likely soon to become so; perhaps he had finished a piece of carving, and hoped to get a good price for it. Yes; but the truth was (whether Sebastian recognised it or not) that the moral energy to achieve his emancipation was no longer in him. The iron had not only entered his soul, but it had bound his limbs. He could still see the wiser course, and reason about it, and tell himself that to-morrow he would adopt it; but he never would adopt it. He was deteriorating both as to his physical and his spiritual nature; his blood

was congealing, his will losing its integrity, his brain becoming inert. Very soon he would be no more capable of taking his former brilliant part in the world, than was any one of the cowed and sullen beings whose ruined faces passed his own day after day. The neighbourhood of overt sin and misery was breathing into him its foul distemper. Sebastian Strome was, after all, on the way to obtain some notion of what life in pandemonium might be like.

At last the morning came when the ten pounds had melted away to a few shillings, and the greater part of those would be due for rent the next day. The baby had been wakeful during the night, and Sebastian had carried it for many hours in his arms, once in a while falling half asleep over it, though never soundly enough to forget what he was about. In the morning he gave it some milk out of its feeding-bottle, reflecting the while that twenty-four hours hence he might find it difficult to procure a fresh supply. The baby soon passed into slumber, with its head

turned on one side, and its little hands folded beneath its chin. As it lay so, it had a great resemblance to its mother—her long curving eyelashes, and the unsophisticated pout of the upper lip. It seemed to sleep more peacefully than usually; the feverish colour had left its cheeks, and there was a delicate moisture on its small forehead, and along the sides of its tiny nose. ‘Perhaps it is going to get well after all!’ thought Sebastian, with a momentary lightening of his dull heart. ‘Think of baby well and strong! Ah me! I wish there was something I could thank for it!’

But the next moment his heart sank again. ‘What is it to me whether she gets well or not? To-morrow, or next day at furthest, I must either give her up or keep her to die of starvation. Only one more day together? Oh, baby!’

He got down on his knees by the side of the crib, and remained there for a long time in a sort of stupor: no tears, and no prayers; nothing but pain. He had himself eaten only

bread and butter for several days past, and since yesterday morning he had omitted even that; so that his bodily weakness was great. Doubtless this affected his brain to some extent. At all events, the idea came to him suddenly, and like the revelation of a thing long sought, that he would kill the baby and himself, and so solve the whole problem in the simplest and most direct way. He arose immediately and went to his tool-box; but before he had opened it he had decided that nothing in it would do, and his mind had become fixed upon a certain bright sharp knife, with a black handle studded with brass nails, which he had often seen in the hands of a cobbler who lived a little way down the street. That knife he would borrow; no other would do. He filled the baby's bottle again, and put it where her lips would easily find it if she waked while he was away; then he pulled a cap down over his eyes, and went out.

He walked along briskly at first, his spirits seeming light by contrast with his former mood; whether the lightness were that of

delirium, he was not concerned to inquire. He was aware of an excessive weakness of the limbs, but was little troubled thereby, for it seemed to him that he could do without his body, and that if it were to fail, something that was himself would go on just the same—or perhaps with even more activity. It was absurd to suppose that a man like Sebastian Strome could be held in check by a trumpery tale of flesh and bones! It was true that in order to kill himself, the flesh and bones would have to be within reach. Yes; but if he dropped them on the way to the cobbler's, he could pick them up again on his way back. Stay, where was the cobbler's? He must have passed it; this street, too, had an unfamiliar look: could it be—yes, actually! Sebastian had lost his way: lost it in spite of the weight of flesh and bones which he still continued to drag about after him. Could anything be more ludicrous? Lightly laughing at himself, he turned about and began to retrace his steps. But a number of streets presented themselves, and not a familiar one

among them. Verily, if this search was to go on much longer, the wisest course would be to leave the flesh and bones in some quiet nook or other, and proceed without them. Some nice quiet nook, where they could remain unmeddled with until the time came to use them again.

While Sebastian was looking for such a receptacle for the superfluous part of himself, he heard a shouting and a tumult, and a man running at full speed dashed round the corner, came into violent collision with him, and dashed on. A few moments afterwards a number of people followed, also running; among them a policeman. To these, however, Sebastian paid no heed, being, in fact, temporarily absent. The collision had sent his flesh and bones staggering into an open doorway; he had judged it advisable to leave them there, and had departed on a quest whither the most able-bodied policeman would have been puzzled to follow him.

The doorway appertained to a dwelling occupied by a prosperous pair of cadgers; a

man and a woman. Some hours after the collision and its consequences, they came home and stumbled across the flesh and bones. The woman was munching a crust of bread, the man gnawing a sausage. They had just had a go of gin at the neighbouring pub, and their hearts were merry.

‘What the hell is that?’ inquired the male cadger, good-naturedly turning it over with his foot. ‘What does all the drunken blokes come to sleep it off in our front ’all for?’

‘That? Why, I knows ’im!’ exclaimed the female cadger, stooping over the object. ‘It’s that queer cove as lives at t’other end of the street. Look at the mole on ’im!’

‘What, he as has a baby? Well, right you are! He can’t be drunk then, cos he never drinks nothin’. Looks like he was dead.’

‘No such luck!’ responded the female humorously, putting her hand over his heart. ‘He’s just gone faint, that’s wot it is, with gettin’ nothin’ to heat. And no wonder—sich starvegut pay as that ’ere carvin’ brings

him in! Why don't he take to cadgerin', and make a hincome like us do? 'Old on to 'im a bit, whilst I step round to the pub and fetches a nip o' brandy. We'll soon have him right agin!'

It was already evening when Sebastian dragged himself up his narrow stairs, his heart quaking. At every few steps he paused, listening for the baby's cry. It was not crying. Why? It was asleep still, perhaps. Nonsense! would it sleep for ten hours? Then why did it not cry? Had some one taken it away? Was it——

He stopped for two long minutes outside the door, unable to summon up resolution enough to open it. He carried in his hand, not the knife he had gone out for, and which he had forgotten, but a little can of fresh milk. At last he managed to open the door, and came fearfully in.



CHAPTER IV.

DEPENDENCE.



HE broad-shouldered figure of a man was sitting with his back towards him, apparently holding something in his arms, which he was gently rocking backwards and forwards. This figure rose and faced Sebastian as he entered. It was the baby that he held in his arms, and it was sleeping quietly.

‘Beg parding, mate,’ said the man in a husky whisper, smiling and nodding. ‘I come in here this mornin’, an’ found the little un a-yellin’ and a-carryin’ on, all by itself, and the milk-bottle empty. Well, I gets the

bottle full agin, and thinks I, I'll just bide here till the old woman comes 'ome—supposin' there was an old woman, yer see ; but maybe you're she ?'

Sebastian knew the voice, and he knew the face. His own was turned from the light, and his cap was over his eyes. He held out his arms for the baby, and the stranger put her gently into them, without awakening her. Sebastian kissed her, and then sat down heavily on his chair. The stranger looked on, nodding and smiling. At length Sebastian said : 'How came you here ?'

'Well,' responded the other sociably, 'seein' as you seems to be an honest sort of a chap, and I've made free with your belongin's, as it were, I don't mind tellin' yer. The way of it is, I was cuttin' away from a bobby, wot was after me for a pocket-book I'd prigged, and comin' round the top of this street, I cannoned into a chap as was goin' t'other way, and he dropped. Well, I kep' right on, until gettin' to the door o' this 'ouse,

and feelin' a bit blowed, I cuts upstairs; and baby she yells, and I goes in and finds her as I told yer. And bein' fond o' babbies, and not overmuch carin' to be seen on the street just then, I stayed; and so here I be!

'Do you know who I am?' demanded Sebastian after a pause. He removed his cap, and added: 'Don't you know me, Prout?'

Prout stared at him for a long time.

'You ain't Mr. Sebastian Strome?' he said at last, with an intonation half-embarrassed, half-incredulous. 'No; he ain't much more'n half the age of you!'

'Well, that is my name.'

Prout scratched his head, and looked down.

'A rum go this—ain't it?' he said. 'And might that be Fanny's little kid?'

'Hers and mine.'

'I say, what's come to you, Mr. Strome? I never looked to see you this way!'

'If you'd been a day or two later, you wouldn't have found me here. I'm at the

end of my tether. I was starving, I believe, when you ran into me on the corner. I'm very much obliged to you, Prout, for taking care of the baby.'

'And to think of she bein' Fanny's,—and yours, of course! Starvin', did you say, Mr. Strome?'

'No matter about that. I was very anxious about the baby, and I thank you for taking care of her. If I'd a thousand pounds to give, you'd be welcome to it.'

'I shouldn't take it, sir. You're welcome yourself. Well, I suppose, now, my room'll be better nor my company,' he added, moving towards the door. The baby stirred, and sent forth a vague sound, preparatory to waking up. Prout stopped. 'Did you say starvin', meanin' as you hadn't enough to eat, nor money to buy it with?' he demanded, holding his cap in one hand and slowly rubbing it with the other. ''Cos I got money enough, yer see, if that's all. That 'ere purse I prigged to-day 'as got seven pun' ten in it, 'sides silver. Let alone others.

Look 'ere, Mr. Strome, what do you say? You let me stay here along with you, and we'll go halves—share and share alike, as pals should. What do you say? I'm flush now—maybe you will be next week; and we'll take care o' the little kid between 'us. Come, now!

Prout could have no idea how strong a temptation to Strome this proposal was. To accept it would mean not only to choose life instead of death, but to choose life with the baby instead of death without it. On the other hand, it was a proposal from one who frankly confessed himself a thief to go shares in his plunder. But, again, that would not last long: as soon as Sebastian had had a little time to recover himself, he would be able to earn some more money by his carving; or, if the worst came to the worst, he could make a draft on the five hundred pounds. It was a very strong temptation—to-day! Had such a thing been mentioned as possible six months ago, Sebastian would have laughed it to scorn. But those six months had worked

a difference—all the difference between pride and abasement, independence and dependence, honour and dishonour. While he hesitated, the baby opened its eyes and yawned at him.

‘Come, now!’ repeated Prout persuasively, coming forward a step. ‘Come, now!’ The baby stretched out its small arm, caught its fingers in its father’s beard, and smiled. ‘Well, look at that now!’ murmured Prout, with a grunt of admiration, peeping over Sebastian’s shoulder. ‘On’y seven months old, and takin’ all that notice! Well—look—look at that agin! Oh, my word, she is a beauty!’

‘Yes, she’s very clever; when she gets a little more flesh on her, she’ll be three times as pretty. She’s had a sort of fever for the last two months.’

‘Poor little soul! Never you fear, sir, we’ll fetch her round, between us, till she’s the stoutest young ’un between this and ’Ammersmith!’

Sebastian made no reply. Prout squatted

down on the floor, and for nearly half an hour the baby entertained both of them with the most self-possessed and fascinating geniality.

‘Seems like she know’d me already!’ said Prout, with a delighted chuckle.

‘You mustn’t make her too fond of you!’ returned Sebastian, with a short nervous laugh. ‘By the way, I shall be able to pay you back, you know—it’s only just for the moment——’

‘Make your mind easy, sir! Why, an hour with this ’ere little kid is worth all the money I could prig in a year! And that puts me in mind—I’ve been goin’ on a bit wild since I see you last; but I shall give over now, and live honest. So yer can make yer mind easy. I’d live honest for the sake o’ this little kid o’ Fanny’s—and yours—if I was forced to work my ’ands off!’

Sebastian laughed again. ‘Maybe I’m not so particular as you,’ he remarked; and this was all that passed between them on the subject.

The baby's health improved from this day : she treated Prout with a gracious condescension that made him her absolute slave : he approved himself the most cheerful and diligent of godfathers. He had given up 'priggin',' and taken to a more conventional, if less exciting and profitable employment. Sebastian resumed his carving ; but his industry was not what it had been ; he was fitful and sombre. At the end of two months the balance of the household accounts was still somewhat against him.

One September day Prout proposed that they should take the baby for an outing to Hampstead Heath. It was superb weather ; they travelled part of the way on the top of an omnibus, and walked the rest, carrying the baby by turns. They had their luncheon on the grass beneath the trees. Late in the afternoon they set off on their return home. A short distance from the Heath they met a carriage with coachman and footman in livery, and a lady seated within. Sebastian was carrying the baby. The lady was thin and

pale, but of a grand type of beauty ; her hair auburn, her eyes dark hazel. She fixed these large eyes steadfastly upon Sebastian, as he and Prout stood aside to let the carriage pass. Immediately afterwards she spoke to the coachman, who reined in his horses ; and the lady leaned out, and beckoned Sebastian to come to her.



CHAPTER V.

A GODMOTHER.

PROUT made some remark. Sebastian did not hear what it was : he was feeling a surge of emotion within him, whether pleasant or otherwise he knew not. It was very strong. The baby set up a cry : he was pressing it so hard against his breast that the little autocrat was in pain. This so far recalled him to himself that he heard Prout offer to hold the baby while he spoke to the lady in the carriage. He only shook his head in reply, and the next moment he found himself standing beside the carriage, face to face with its

occupant. She smiled a little, and put out her hand: the baby, who had been gazing searchingly in her face, now ducked down its head coquettishly on its father's shoulder and put its thumb in its mouth, still not removing its gaze.

‘How pretty she has grown,’ said the lady. ‘Won’t you shake hands with me, Sebastian?’

Sebastian saw that she had just pulled off her right glove—hastily, for it was turned inside out, and torn down the palm. He raised his hand and clasped hers for an instant, and felt a return clasp.

‘How do you do, Miss Dene?’ he said mechanically.

At this her face winced slightly, and Sebastian immediately realised his blunder—an odd one for him to make, since there was no fact of which he was more profoundly conscious than that Mary Dene had become Mary Fawley. But she looked so much like the Mary Dene whom he had known, and so little like the Mary Fawley that he did

not know, that the former name had fallen from him involuntarily, and he was reflecting on the absurdity of a woman changing her name and expecting other people to recognise it, when she said :

‘ I want you to get into the carriage and drive with me a little way. I’ll bring you back. We can talk better so.’

Sebastian’s first feeling was that he could not do this; and by way of excuse he glanced round towards Prout, who was standing a few rods off.

‘ Have you any engagement with him ?’ asked Mary. ‘ Perhaps he would wait till we come back. Then I can drive you both towards the city. Tell him—or shall I ?’

‘ No !’ said Sebastian hastily. His real feeling was that he was not gentleman enough to sit in the same carriage with so grand a lady. ‘ He would not mind, I suppose,’ he added ; ‘ but—I should not like to leave the baby with him.’

‘ No, indeed. You must bring her with you. She would enjoy a drive, I’m sure,’

Mary interposed in a fuller tone. 'You must let me have my way,' she continued, with a smile; 'I have hoped to meet you so long, and this is such a chance. Let me hold the baby while you go and arrange with your friend.'

She put out both her hands towards the baby, saying 'Come, dear!' in a tone and with a look that the baby responded to at once, stretching forth its little arms to be taken with an air of serious and complacent condescension. Mary kissed it, and was on intimate terms with it immediately; and Sebastian went back to Prout, and after a short confabulation with him, presented himself at the carriage again. The footman opened the door, and he got in. He was about to take his place on the front seat, but Mary made room for him beside her, and so they rolled away. It was much like a dream: that is, Sebastian found difficulty in reconciling what was happening now with what had been happening for the last nine months. By degrees it was the present that

seemed the reality, and the past became dreamlike. It needed a glance at his threadbare coat-sleeves and dingy trousers to convince himself that Spitalfields still remained a fact.

‘But then,’ he reflected, ‘it need never be a fact for me again, if I so decide. This is what I was born to—not that. Spitalfields is not inside of me, so I can get away from it if I will. I might drive on in this very carriage, until——’

He fell into a reverie.

Mary took care not to interrupt him. She had not invited him to sit there beside her for half an hour merely to gratify her idle whim. She had calculated on the power of old associations, on the strength of inborn instincts, on the keen flavour of contrasts; and, perhaps as much as anything, also on that very recognition of possibility which Sebastian was just now experiencing. Her aim was to induce him to abandon his present course of life; but she had the tact to perceive that direct argument should be the last

and not the first means towards success. It was not, therefore, until she saw that he was emerging from his pre-occupation that she spoke.

‘This is a lovely baby, Sebastian. See, she has fallen asleep on my arm. What is her name, dear little soul?’

‘Her name is Mary. I always call her Baby when any one else is there,’ he added hurriedly, and regretting the admission he had made. ‘No one knows that her name is Mary; and she hasn’t been baptised, so it can be changed if you——’

‘I am very glad you felt willing to give her that name, since it is mine too,’ Mary interposed gently. ‘Then I have a right to ask you to let me be her godmother.’ She paused a moment, and then said, looking down at the sleeping child’s face: ‘I have no little baby of my own.’

‘No.’

‘How your mother would envy me, if she could see me now!’ Mary went on. ‘And so might any woman, I’m sure. Your mother

was very well, by-the-way, when I saw her last week. She grows more sweet and beautiful, Sebastian, every day. She sometimes speaks to me about you—your letters, you know : she depends very much on them, though they are so short; but, as Dr. Stemper says, they show you are alive.'

'I hope she does not show—that no one knows that I am——'

'Only we three! It won't hurt you to have us three think of you and talk of you, will it? But we will, whether or not, sir! You cannot help yourself. I don't think any one else suspects even that you are in England. I have heard all sorts of queer guesses as to what has become of you. You will be famous by the time you come back.'

Sebastian would not have believed it—but the information that people thought enough about him to wonder where he was titillated something that had been his vanity. He passed over Mary's latter sentence, and found himself saying, with a rather elaborate carelessness :

‘They think it worth a guess, do they?’

‘Oh, did you imagine you were forgotten? Lady Featherstone told me the other day that she had been given to understand, on good authority, that you were in New York, and that you had entered the Legislature there. Mrs. Musk-Mandalay heard it, and said it was just what she had expected: that she had always said you ought to be in a government position, and that if you would only come back to London, they would put you in the diplomatic corps—corpse, she called it. Old Lord Welshford, who was there, said in his authoritative way that you were in Australia, not America, and that you were a great sheep-farmer there—and then he paid you a compliment. Some one else suggested that you had gone under an assumed name to the Crimea, and had already been promoted from a private to a lieutenant, for gallantry in the face of the enemy. So, you see, you have been a great traveller since you disappeared, and where-

ever you have gone you have distinguished yourself. If you were to come back to-morrow, you would be treated with great consideration.'

Sebastian heaved a sigh; for all this caused him to reflect (as Mary perhaps intended it should) that what he had actually done since his 'disappearance' would make a lamentable show beside the least complimentary of the imaginary careers assigned to him. And yet it need not have been so; he was capable of all, and more than all that people believed that he could accomplish. Moreover, his companion's seemingly aimless words made him feel that his present position implied nothing heroic or impressive, but was rather open to ridicule, as a grotesque mistake; and instead of any longer contemplating with secret complacency the possible contingency of its becoming known, he felt an uneasy conviction that such a revelation would only result in his being laughed at. For what is more helplessly ludicrous than to be detected in a false position? The

times when external displays of penitence commanded respect and reverence were gone by. Nowadays a man was expected to keep all that to himself ; and instead of spending forty years on the top of a pillar, to go about in the world making himself useful to the utmost of his capacities. Mortification of the flesh had no longer any market value : it would not bring grist to the mill : if it was indulged in at all, it should be as a private luxury, not incompatible with a clean shirt-front and carefully-parted hair. A man was not respectable for what he denied himself, but for what he gave to others. To assume the contrary was to suppose that the world would prefer an individual to its collected self—a patent absurdity.

The rich texture of Mary's black satin dress, crushed beside him on the carriage-seat ; the delicate perfection of her glove, the golden gleam of a chain and bracelet, the crisp elegance of her bonnet : then the soft thunder of the well-groomed horses' reduplicated hoof-tramp, the easy velocity of the

cushioned carriage along the smooth road, the glisten of the panels, and the powdered locks and spotless liveries of the coachman and footman—all these aristocratic details made the threadbare Sebastian feel foolish, and inwardly grateful to Mary for not making fun of him, but, instead, treating him as if he were still in possession of his sanity. All these advantages, or the better part of them, he had a congenital right to ; by relinquishing them he declared, virtually, that he was strong enough to do without them. Now the fact was that he had relinquished them as a revenge upon himself for not being strong enough even to do with them. This was much as if a club-footed man were to attempt to cure himself of limping by lopping the foot off.

‘ I am not only a cripple, but a fool ! ’ was the issue of Sebastian’s meditations. Then he glanced at Mary, and noticed again that she looked weary and pale.

‘ Have you been well ? ’ he asked her.

‘ Yes. I have been very much occupied.

My life is different from what it used to be. I am very well.'

'Why did you ask me to drive with you in this carriage?'

'I wanted to make the acquaintance of the baby, for one thing. Why shouldn't I?'

'Do you remember when we saw each other last?'

'There is no need to think of that.'

'Do you think the same of me now that you did then?'

'I was angry with you then. I stopped being angry long ago. Do you wish me to tell you? I think you acted generously in leaving me. But that was no reason why you should go away altogether.'

'It is too late now for my coming back to do you any good.'

'I would not ask you to come back for my sake, Sebastian. I have no right—no reason to do that. But what do you mean by too late?'

'Have you never heard that I meant to be present at your wedding?'

The colour rose slowly in Mary's face as she turned it towards him.

'I never heard anything that I understood. But I never asked for any explanation.'

'Well, I needn't explain it now. I knew Fawley long before you did. You have been long enough married to know that I might have prevented your marriage at the last moment.'

Mary's eyes darkened with such an expression that, for a moment, Sebastian thought she would stop the carriage and tell him to get out. Several distinct times she seemed to be going to speak impetuously, but each time she restrained herself. At last she said in a husky tone :

'Since you were not there, you ought not to have spoken on the subject now. I am—Mrs. Fawley.'

'I wanted to tell you why I didn't come. It would have cost the baby its life. I hesitated, but I couldn't leave it. Nothing else would have kept me.'

Mary's eyes rested for a long time on the

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baby, which was still sleeping serenely, with an immeasurable unconsciousness of the possibility of one human being interfering with another. By-and-by she bent over, and lightly kissed its smooth little cheek ; but all she said was :

‘ We cannot talk about this. You did well not to come.’

‘ Has Fawley got over his hurt ? ’ Sebastian inquired.

‘ He will always be an invalid : he doesn’t get better. He suffers a great deal : sometimes he is not himself.’ Emotion came into her voice as she continued : ‘ You would be sorry for him if you could see him. Oh, Sebastian, it is not worth while to be any one’s enemy. There is so little happiness. It seems to me I could forgive anything.’

‘ I suppose because you have so much to forgive.’

‘ No ; but I see how much I have to be forgiven. Who is better than another ? It is only God who is good. We cannot make our evil less—we can only make His part in

us greater. There is so little happiness.'

'Yes, there couldn't well be less; but neither will there ever be much more, I fancy. The world won't be mended; if good people could do it, it would have been done long ago. Successful villains are about as happy as anybody. As to Fawley, I can afford to pass over any harm he may have done me—that is of small consequence, but I can't forgive him what he had done to you. And it doesn't seem to me that a beneficent Providence such as you believe in would have permitted it.'

Sebastian spoke with a cynical resentfulness—not unlike that of an embittered school-boy who declines to recognise the religious efficacy of a birch rod. Mary, who had more power to feel that a thing was right or wrong than to support her feeling by arguments, made no direct reply; only letting it be apparent by her face, and a slight movement of her body, that she profoundly dissented from his view. They drove on for awhile in

silence, and Sebastian had a perception that this interview, which seemed to offer so many possibilities for desirable things to happen, was slipping through his fingers, so to speak, with no good result. It was his usual luck, he sullenly told himself; and after all, what good worth having was there to be had? It was only that Mary's gracious neighbourhood had suggested the notion, against reason, that some further and permanent benefit ought to follow. The last infirmity of human minds is to hope for some indefinite improvement in their circumstances. Sebastian was angry that this infirmity should still retain a hold upon him. He resolved that it should do so no longer.

‘If you are going on any farther,’ said he, ‘I must ask to be let out here. I want to get back before dark.’

Mary turned her face slowly upon him with a grave, full-eyed gaze; and then gave the coachman the order to turn. This was done, and they set off again towards London. The setting sun was now behind them, and

sent long shadows across the landscape, and dimly illumined the hazy levels of the distant city. Sebastian sat with his arms folded, and a meagre grimness settling over his face. He did not care if the sun never rose again.

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CHAPTER VI.

BABY'S ARGUMENT.

Y-AND-BY he felt Mary's hand touch his arm, draw it gently from its folded position, and finally rest upon his hand. In a moment, all that had never been declared ; between them—all that his sin and pride had wilfully and shamefully banished, but which his better soul had inwardly desired ; all the intense fire of the blessing that might have transfigured him, and which he had rejected ; all this, and many other nameless lost victories thrilled in his blood and kindled in his eyes. His look met hers with a sharp eagerness ; but whether hers was responsive he could not tell. Was

there passion in it, or compassion merely? Now he knew how much he had been starved. Was there manna for him after all?

‘Why do you go back, Sebastian?’ she asked.

‘Where else should I go?’

‘Your life there has done you no good. If you don’t care for yourself, can you not care for others? Why should you make this little innocent baby live in a place like that?’

‘The baby! Is that all?’

‘No, not all; but that should be enough.’

‘It is not enough,’ replied Sebastian after a pause. He intended that Mary should show him everything that was in her heart, since she had put his in such a tumult. He had not the generosity that would have prompted him to commit himself before he knew her mind. He would hold himself in leash, and first be sure of her. ‘I cannot let the baby go while I live,’ he continued. ‘If she takes harm from it, that is not my fault: let God see to it, if He be so kind as you say.’

‘Take care that He does not see to it!’ said Mary withdrawing her hand.

‘Well, I will stay there,’ he went on, clenching his teeth. ‘I should make a fine figure in a fashionable drawing-room, with my baby! You seem to think that a man can throw aside such an experience as I have been through, and come out with as much strength and appetite as ever! You advise me to come, but what would you do to help me if I came? Yes; I should want a great deal of help—I’m quite as much an invalid, in my way, as your husband in his. I’m afraid I shouldn’t find myself at home; people wouldn’t appreciate my baby and me. They might even request us to return whence we came.’

‘I will give you any help I can, if that is all,’ said Mary.

‘That is all; but any help is no help. Will you help me with your love?’

He had spoken the word in spite of his intended reticence. Mary, by one motion, withdrew herself a little from him, and

turned more towards him. Her face questioned him, but with an expression that he could not fathom, or which he misinterpreted. Whether, at his next word, it would change to anger, to sternness, or to invitation, he could not tell. Be that as it might, now was his time to speak, and he spoke.

‘I love you, and I always have loved you.’

No answer.

‘I loved you before you loved me, and before I knew it myself. But it was that which awakened all that part of me, for good and evil. I can see the history of it now. I had never meant to marry—I would not think of marriage; so I went about over Europe, and thought I would be a Jesuit, or anything rather than keep on loving you: at last it seemed to me I was cured. But when I came home, I fell into this degradation, which would never have been if I had not loved you. You had awakened that devil or angel in me—it is both! The degradation made me cold, and I thought the trouble was over. When I came to you afterwards—no

matter why—I still thought it was not for love. You call it generous in me to have left you: I fancied at the time it was a sort of moral decency; because my father's death and other things had made me wish to be decent; but I know now it was because I loved you. I wish I had loved you so little as to stay with you!

Mary still kept silence; but it was evident enough she listened.

'I know you loved me, Mary; I felt it through all my crust of depravity. And you took Fawley because you loved me—out of pride. You love me still—I can see it! Will you acknowledge it? I know it!'

'You do not seem to know me,' Mary said in a low voice.

'I know you may deny it. But why should you? You made a miserable mistake with that creature you call your husband. Whatever a husband may be, he can never be one. You and I know that; why should we heed him? No harm can come from our being frank to each other, not even to him:

though harm done to him would be good! Is a worthless thing like that worth more than you and I together? Would you rather waste your life in keeping him alive, whose life is a curse to himself and all connected with him, than make your life and mine a joy to ourselves, and perhaps a blessing to other people (though I won't pretend I care much for that)? Is that what you call intelligent charity?'

'Do you realise what you are proposing to me?'

'I ask you to forget formulas and conventionality—you are great enough to do it! I have not been fit to be loved by you hitherto; but I can become so. Nothing but your love can make me so. Mary, Mary, think what you can do by letting your mouth say the truth! It already is the truth without saying. Don't be a hypocrite for the sake of a name—or for the sake of Mrs. Musk-Mandalay and Lady Featherstone! What have we to do with them? Mary—come!'

'If I were to come—poor Sebastian!'

‘I need a heaven : you are heaven to me, Mary. You can come if you will. You will!’

‘See this innocent little baby of yours, Sebastian. Would you have said all this if she could have understood it?’

‘If she could have understood all the reasons for saying it——’

‘Oh, hush ! Be wicked if you must, but do not try to make it appear like good. If she were of my age, and a man asked her to commit this sin, would you encourage her to it ? See how pure and innocent her little face is ! Would you look her in the eyes and tell her to—— ? If you say yes, Sebastian, then I will answer you !’

‘Her case can never be ours : she will judge for herself, as we must do for ourselves.’

‘But you love her, don’t you ?’

‘You are putting me off !’

‘I must understand you. You love her and yet you would not urge her to do the thing you ask of me. And yet you say it is

because you love me that you ask it. Which of us do you love best ?

‘ There are more kinds of love than one ; they cannot be compared.’

‘ No—so it seems ! You love her so well that you would not have her insulted and disgraced ; but you don’t hesitate to disgrace and insult me. If I am to dishonour myself for you, you should offer me a fair price—the best you have, no second best ! I will have an equal bargain, or none.’

‘ You talk coolly about bargains !’

‘ It is well I am cool ! What have you seen in me ? Is there any evil spirit in my face or voice ? Have I shown myself dissolute and shameless ? Could you find no viler woman in your slum, that you must come to me ? You tell me that I love you. If I do, God help me ! for then I should be a fit mate for you ! I did love you once—no, I only thought so until now ! It was the happiest belief in my life, that I did once love you. Oh ! what are you ?’

These sentences were charged with intense

energy and passion—none the less that they were spoken within the ordinary tone which a lady may use in addressing a gentleman who is driving with her in a carriage. Sebastian heard them with a feeling in which wretchedness was mingled with a strange kind of delight. To be the object of Mary's scorn and indignation exhilarated him while it crushed him. She was terrible and superb; it was just as it should be; he would not have had it otherwise. And yet he had wished to overcome her, and had put forth his whole strength to do so. But he was sensible of a finer joy for her victory than he could have felt for his own. She had smitten him with Ithuriel's spear; and the divine weapon, in bringing anguish to the baser part of his nature, had given life to all that was still honest and clean.

'I am a fool,' he said quietly, and looking up at her, 'for this reason: I had a glimpse of Heaven—in you—and I immediately profaned it. Now I have lost it for ever. Well; at all events I shall never have a chance to

be a fool again. Give me my baby and let me go.'

But the baby had waked up, and now began to whimper, and intertwined its little fingers in Mary's gold chain. Sebastian's face fell; it seemed as if the child was unwilling to come to him. Such a thing had never happened before.

'Oh, Mary!' he muttered; 'don't you give me up too!'

It was to the baby that he spoke; but the words melted the other Mary's great, indignant, trembling heart. They made her realise his forlornness; and she was as forlorn as he.

'Can't I help you, somehow? Can't we help each other?' she said imploringly. 'I wanted to help you; but I did not know you when you began to speak so—there was something devilish and horrible in your place! Sebastian, it was the devil tempted us; for I felt it too, for a moment—else I should not have spoken so angrily.' Her face, as she made this confession, was suffused

with warm flushes, but the great earnestness that inspired her kept her eyes from flinching.

She went on: 'That is past now—is it not? There can be a pure and noble life for us, if we will take it—it need not be all loss and despair! Be a good man, Sebastian, so that I may be a good woman! It is hard for me as well as for you. I must love him; because my duty and honour are bound up in him. You must love your baby, and think of me through her! God will not desert us: we shall have what strength we need. Sebastian, when the end comes, shall we not be glad to have done our best?'

Sebastian had too much tampered with the integrity of his soul for it to retain the recuperative power of Mary's. He was at this moment heavy and weary; his spirit laboured, and his speech came slowly and after effort. He could neither think nor speak confidently.

'I don't know,' he said. 'There is very little of me. You must expect nothing. I

have no hold on anything good. Baby, will you come ?'

Mary took the child between her hands and held it towards him. Some wave of infantine woe had passed through it, leaving it with quivering mouth and tearful cheeks ; but it had caught sight of a small gold locket at the end of Mary's chain, and this had suddenly comforted it. It kept its hold upon it, therefore, while passing to Sebastian's arms ; and Mary quickly unclasped the chain, and threw it round the little Mary's neck.

'I am its godmamma, you know !' she said, with a smile to the father.

'Tell me one thing,' said Sebastian. 'Does he ill-use you ?'

'See! she feels quite consoled now that she is with you again.—Oh no!—Good-bye, then. Good-bye, baby—God bless you !'


The consciousness of having told that great falsehood did not seem to oppress Mrs. Fawley, as she drove on alone. But, indeed, what was it to her that her husband cursed her, outraged her, struck her, even, so

long as she had the memory of that faint but still unmistakable light in Sebastian's face, as he stood at the roadside with the baby on his shoulder and nodded farewell ?



CHAPTER VII.

BY THE CRIB.

HAT same evening, after the baby had been put to sleep, Strome and Prout sat together in the street-doorway, smoking their pipes. The neighbourhood was comparatively quiet. A few dirt-encrusted children were playing in the gutter; there was a muffled noise of drunken dancing and singing from a house across the way; a woman, one side of whose face was bleeding from a recent blow, came out and stood on the side-walk, muttering curses to herself. A sailor, inarticulately drunk, was staggering about the street in the distance.

From the sky above two or three stars looked down. Altogether it was an unusually peaceful and pleasant evening.

‘No, she don’t know me, Miss Dene don’t,’ Prout remarked, as he drew a match along his thigh, and applied it to his pipe-bowl. ‘How should she? Them swells don’t never look at us the way they looks at each other.’

‘She isn’t Miss Dene now; she’s married.’

‘Married? No! Why, I thought she was going to take up with you again, by the looks of it. Who’s the lucky man?’

‘You know the man well enough—Selim Fawley. They were married months and months ago.’

‘Fawley?—And you knowed it? What didn’t you tell me before for?’

‘I preferred to talk about something else.’

‘Fawley married, is he?’ repeated the other meditatively. ‘So that crack he got on the back of his nut didn’t do his business arter all.’

‘What do you know about that?’

‘Well, it was me give it him, that’s all!’

‘You struck him—from behind? I shouldn’t have thought it of you, Prout.’

‘’Twa’n’t nothin’ to me which way I hit him. He just passed the door of the pub as I come out of it—bein’ about two parts screwed—and I let him have it without stoppin’ to ax his leave: “Take that!” says I, and down he drops. If he’d done you the way he did me, you’d ’a’ mashed him yerself.’

‘What harm had he ever done you?’

‘Harm enough! Didn’t he set me arter Fanny, without tellin’ me what for, and she gets killed? and he tells me I’m to blame, and calls me a lot o’ names, and packs me off without my month coz I’d got tight! So I lets him have it: and good enough for him! If I’d knowed as Miss Dene was his lay, I’d ’a’ let him have it a bit hotter than I did; for she’s a decent young lady, as you knows, Mr. Strome, bein’ that way with her yerself; and he ain’t good for her.’

It is conceivable that Prout’s hearer might have owned to some sympathy with the sentiment of this speech; but he chose to

say, 'Luckily for you, Fawley got over it. That's what comes of getting drunk.'

'Not always, it don't, Mr. Strome,' returned Prout demurely. 'It was bein' tight at the graveyard that day as kep' me from pitchin' into you, I know. Howsoever, I don't drink nothin' now, 'nd I can make my fifteen bob or one quid a day, when time's good, as honest as the best of 'em. And that's all along o' the little kid, bless its little 'eart! I'd do more than that for her, too.'

'Suppose the baby wasn't here, you wouldn't go back to drinking and thieving, would you?'

'Wouldn't I? Why not? What call would I have to keep steady, 'cept for her? Other folks, what believes in religion and that, they goes to church and that does for them; but I ain't got no religion, nor I don't go to no church; but I goes to the little kid; she's church enough for me. And so fur as I can see, Mr. Strome, it's about the same way with you. She's a pretty good sort of religion for you too, ain't she?'

Strome made no direct rejoinder; but

presently he said, 'Suppose we try going to church, some day, with the other folks?'

'Takin' the little kid along too, in course?'

'Certainly.'

'Well, I'm game for it if you are; is there any church in pertickler you want to go to?'

'I don't know of any.'

'If your father was alive now!—but it ain't every one can do the trick the way he could. If you'd been his kind, sir, we'd not 'a' needed to go 'untin' arter a church, would we? But talkin' o' that, there was a chap what was on a plumbin' job along with me last week, and he was tellin' 'bout one o' these 'ere missionary coves, what spouted every Sunday over there nigh to Seven Dials. And he was that took with it, this chap was, that he'd got religion, and knocked off damnin' and drinkin', and carried round a calf-skin in his breeches' pocket, not to take his hoath on, d'yer see, but to read in, like it was the *P'lice News*, or a story-book.'

'What was the missionary's name?'

'Well, I dunno what his name was; and

he wa'n't one o' them Church of England coves; he was on the loose, that's to say; Dissenters they calls 'em. He wa'n't poor, neither; got lots o' tin, this pal o' mine said, and did his preachin' just coz he liked it, and wanted to do good to other chaps. It seemed to be a rum thing, take it all round. And he was a rum-lookin' one, this missionary was—short and stumpy like, with specs; and as fur his voice—well! that was a little bit the queerest voice ever I heerd. But no matter! when he got to goin', he could just put things so as it done yer good!

'But look here, Prout! Then you went to hear him yourself?'

'Well, so I did, Mr. Strome, and that's the truth; though it slipped out accidental. I hadn't meant to let on about it to you.'

'Why not?'

'Oh, well, I know'd you wa'n't fond o' religion; and you bein' an eddicated man, in course would know what was what better nor me.'

'You never made a greater mistake! And

so all that talk of yours about not going to any church, and taking the baby as your religion, that was all humbug, and intended to draw me out—eh, Master Prout? I didn't know you were so deep. You thought you'd get religion, and leave me out in the cold!

'Not a bit of it, sir—you rest easy. I had a bit of cur'osity, that's all. Religion hadn't never seemed to me much good, 'cept a chap had money and swell togs. Them parsons al'ays come down 'ot on priggin' and gettin' tight and that; but the swells don't 'ave no call to do them things, only gettin' tight, and they can do that at 'ome on the quiet. And I'd thought the most of religion was to believe things a chap couldn't understand; but this missionary cove, he said it warn't so; and he made it clear why not, too.'

'How did he do that?'

'I dunno as I can put it plain, as he did; but he reads something out o' the Bible, and then he pulls off his specs, and says he, "Folks used to think, in the old times, that the sun rose and set, and the earth stood still,

and that the sun made the day and night come just accordin' as he had a mind to ; and leave this place light and that place dark, or t'other way, whichever he took a fancy. And sometimes he'd hide 'imself be'ind the clouds, and not come out all day long ; whilst in another place he'd be shinin' down red-hot out of a clear sky. Well," says he, "that didn't seem the square thing ; it warn't right the sun should favour one spot more'n another, and folks took to findin' fault, coz he didn't give 'em all an eq'al chance, when one 'ad mebbe as good a right to it as another. Well, so it went on, till one day a chap discovered that the sun didn't move at all, but it was the earth turned itself away from him, and made its own darkness ; and as fur the clouds, they was made by the earth too ; so the sun was a-shinin' all the time, and lettin' down light and 'eat the best he know'd how, and it warn't his fault if the earth didn't get the 'good of it. Well now," says he, "that's the way it is with God and man. God's the sun, and man he's the earth ; and God keeps

on lovin' and enlightenin' every man that'll turn towards Him and let himself be loved and enlightened ; but the mischief is, we turns ourselves away, and then cries out that God don't love us. We puts all our faults on Him—that's what it is," this cove says. And says he, "I'll tell you one thing you may learn from that. It ain't no use your sittin' still in your house and puttin' up the shutters and sayin' you believe the sun shines, and that you've no doubt he'll come and find you out and shine on you. What you've got to do is to get up and open the winder and stir about, and do your best to keep where his light can get at you. And if any chap tells you not to open your shutters, coz that would show a lack of faith, and a doubt that the sun could get at you, shutters or none—if a chap tells you that, do you tell him to get thee behind me, Satan ! If you want the sun, you've got to open your shutters for yourself. The power to do that, or to keep 'em shut, is Free Will," says he. "And don't you be afraid of interferin' with the merit of Christ.

The merit of Christ is, not to get at you through the closed shutters, but to put it into your head to want to open 'em ; and if you don't do it, so much the worse for you," says he. And he said a deal more, too ; but that's about all that sticks by me.'

'I think we'll go and hear that fellow,' said Sebastian, after a pause. 'To-morrow is Sunday, and the baby's birthday too—counting by months, that is to say. We'll go in the morning, and after the sermon, he shall baptise her. It can't do any harm, and who knows but it may do some good ? I rather like that idea about the shutters.'

'There's the little kid a-wakin' up,' Prout observed, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, and rising to his feet. 'She'll be baptised Fanny, I s'pose ?'

'I think, upon the whole, I shall call her Mary,' replied Sebastian, as he followed his comrade up the dark stairway.

The next morning the baby was carefully dressed out in a new and clean pinafore and petticoats, which her two guardians had

bought for her a short time before. She also wore a pair of blue kid shoes two inches and a half long ; and blue silk socks coming half-way up her little round white legs. Her head-gear consisted of a sort of poke-bonnet of white starched material, with very large strings tied in a broad bow under the chin. There was furthermore a blue sash round her waist ; and about her neck was hung Mary Fawley's gold chain and locket. The baby had objected, at first, to the bonnet—especially when it came to tying the strings ; but the sight of the locket sufficed to withdraw her mind from this trial, and its apparently agreeable taste confirmed her good-humour. She discoursed to herself in intermittent outbreaks of cooing sounds, unintelligible to mortal ears, but evidently adequate to her own purpose. She also appeared to find something beautifully humorous in the aspect of her attendants, upon both of whom she often smiled enchantingly. Then she would return, with a grave and pre-occupied brow, to her examination of the locket.

‘Never see’d the like in my ’ole life!’ exclaimed Prout, with a contemplative sigh. ‘I’d like to see the cove as would tell me there’s another kid in all London to stand alongside o’ that ’un. And look at the style she’s rigged out in! White satin and Vallin-cennes lace wouldn’t be a patch on it; nor there ain’t a nuss nor a lady’s-maid livin’ as could put ’em on her to look better than we done it! Oh, my eye! she be a beauty and a hangel, if one ever was!’

‘I wonder what she’s saying to herself!’ remarked Sebastian; but he added immediately, ‘No, I don’t; if she could only talk plain, it would be too much. If she could say “Pa,” and “Uncle,” we shouldn’t be able to stand it; and then if anything were to happen to her——’

‘What’s goin’ to happen to her?’

‘It doesn’t seem as if anything could. Still, things can’t always go on this way. She’ll be growing up before we know it, and then she mustn’t stay here.’

‘Ah, I see ’ow it is! You’ll be for takin’

her off and eddicatin' her for a lady. And then what'll I do? It don't seem like I could swaller my vittles or sleep o' nights if she wa'n't by.'

'I'll promise you one thing, Prout: I'll never take her where you can't see her when you want to. If it hadn't been for you, where would she or I be now?'

'For the matter o' that, Mr. Strome, where would I and you be but for her?'

'It's a strange thing, our all living together this way. Where could such a creature as that come from, Prout, except from heaven? It's enough to make one believe in a good God: what do you think?'

'Why not? I'd believe in God, if 'twas only so as to say "God bless her!"'

'Have you ever seen her smile while she was asleep? Well, what do you suppose she could have been smiling at? A child like that can't have dreams such as we have. It must have been at something she sees in her sleep; and what can she see except angels? There must be angels!'

‘In course there be, seein’ she’s one herself.’

‘We talk about educating her ; but it’s she who educates us. See there ! doesn’t she look as if she understood what we were saying ? It makes me feel as if—I say, Prout !’

‘What, sir ?’

‘Did you ever—when you were a little fellow, you know—did your mother ever teach you—did she ever make you kneel down and say your——’

‘Prayers ? Yes, she did. I used to say them. That’s a good bit ago, now.’

‘So did I. It is a long while ago ; but don’t you think we might pray—not for ourselves, of course—for her ?’

‘And that ’ud be the best way of prayin’ for ourselves. Well, I’m game for it. Let’s kneel down by the crib.’



CHAPTER VIII.

THE FOURTH WATCH OF THE NIGHT.

ROUT and Sebastian, carrying the baby, arrived somewhat late at the place where the missionary was to preach. The weather was favourable; for the baby, like other queens, was in the habit of finding the sun accommodating. The room which they now entered was long, low, and dusky; it was, in fact, a large warehouse room, temporarily out of use. The congregation, numbering about sixty, were seated upon an array of benches, eked out by an occasional wooden chair or stool. The pulpit was a board, covered with a white tablecloth,

and laid across the heads of two barrels. Most of the 'pews' were already filled ; but Prout and Sebastian found a bench near the door, occupied only by a couple of women, and upon this they sat down. The baby, offended by the comparative darkness, began to utter small notes of dissatisfaction ; but hereupon one of the women, sitting next to Sebastian, produced from her pocket an empty matchbox ; and having slipped a half-penny in it, she handed the improvised rattle to the indignant potentate, who condescended to be appeased by it. The woman—a stout, brisk, black-eyed personage—then peeped cunningly beneath the white poke-bonnet, smiling and making the chucking noise which is supposed to charm babies under a year old.

'A sweet little soul she is, sir,' she said, in a hoarse whisper, turning to Sebastian, 'and does you credit. Mother dead, I suppose?' Sebastian nodded. 'And her first time in a church, I'll be bound—such church as it is? I thought so! Well, and so it is mine, too, for a number of years, that's to say—never

since I buried my poor 'usband. I don't mostly think much good o' these 'ere preachers—I've said as much to my friend there, as she can tell you, and made no secret of it. "Mrs. Blister," says I, "I've 'eard tell of money-changing in the Temple"—'

'Brethren, let us glorify God by singing the one-hundredth hymn,' came from the minister, standing up beside his pulpit.

The slight start of surprise with which Sebastian had learnt that his old friend Mrs. Blister was present, was immediately succeeded by a deeper feeling of astonishment as the tones of the minister's voice fell on his ear, and he recognised the familiar head and shoulders of Thomas Smillet. 'It can't be! there is some mistake!' was his first thought. But there was no mistake, unless it were in the estimate Sebastian had formed of Smillet's character and capacities. That Smillet was a better fellow than he, he had indeed always been ready to concede; but it was with certain private reservations that made the concession in part contemptuous, or at least

patronising. The idea of Smillet officiating in a pulpit had appeared to him rather in the light of a joke ; but it appeared in a very different light now. It was conscience that had made Smillet give up his intention of becoming a minister ; his having become one must be the result of a conviction and devotion more earnest and profound than any to which Sebastian had ever attained. Once again, therefore, was he compelled to admit the truth of that stern lesson that many things which he had despised and slighted were better and worthier than he. Smillet, contending against every natural drawback and disadvantage, was doing what Sebastian, with all his gifts of mind and body, had failed even to attempt. Verily, it was the will, and not the intellect—charity, and not barren faith, that availed. In this mood Sebastian stood up to sing the hundredth hymn.

It did not seem, at first, as if the singing, from a musical point of view, was going to be much of a success. The greater part of the congregation, though well understanding

the properties of noise, were but slightly acquainted with the scientific organisation thereof called harmony ; and there being no organ or other musical instrument to compensate the vocal deficiencies withal, the effect of the first line or two was not melodious. But then Sebastian, who knew how to sing, uplifted his voice. As he did so, he recollected how once, long ago, he and Mary Dene had stood side by side in his father's church at Cedarhurst, and had sung this same hymn from one book ; and he remembered how grandly her voice had swelled and soared, matching and over-matching his own. And now, as he thought of this, he seemed to be in a dream ; for that very voice, deeper, richer, more than ever resonant with noble pathos, rose as before high above the uncertain quaverings of the crowd, melting and mingling with his, and seeming to lead him upwards to diviner heights than he could have hoped to scale alone. But it was no dream, though stranger than a dream ; for as Sebastian's eyes traversed the dusky

room, he discerned Mary where she stood amidst a group of lower figures and faces, plainly dressed in black, with her head raised and her hands hanging clasped before her. She was turned somewhat away from him ; but he felt that she was aware of his presence, and that through the medium of the sacred chant they were carrying on a kind of mystic communion with each other. The congregation listened, and heard the words and the melody, but they could never penetrate that secret informing sympathy. Mary and he were alone, and spoke to one another in a language without words, and therefore unlimited in significance. What had they said, or not said, when the hymn came to an end ?

Sebastian remained buried in his own thoughts for some time after this, giving only external attention to the progress of the service, and to the civilities of Mrs. Blister, who had recognised her old lodger by his voice, while her imperfect eyesight prevented her from perceiving the change in his dress and aspect ; and she persisted in regarding

him as the husband of the heiress of Dene Hall, and the baby in his arms as the offspring of that union. But when Smillet got up to deliver his sermon, Sebastian's pre-occupation left him, and he bent all his looks and thoughts upon the speaker.

'My text is from the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, sixth verse,' began Smillet, in his feeble, squeaky voice. "'Whoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in Me, it were better for him that a mill-stone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea.'"

At this point some unregenerate member of the congregation crowed like a cock, in derision of the preacher's unlucky treble ; and there was a laugh, more or less smothered.

'I'm sure I don't blame any one for laughing at me,' Smillet said, taking off his spectacles and looking about with a smile. 'I know how ridiculous I am. But I pray to God every day that my bad voice and absurd appearance may not entirely prevent me from doing some good. You see no man can do

good of himself ; it all comes from God through him. So I always hope that my brethren who are kind enough to come to me will be able to forget me, and the way I say things, and think only of the things I say. You will tell me that is asking a great deal ; well, so it is ; but I don't ask it for my own sake. If I were to give you a purse of gold, you wouldn't mind if the purse was badly made and shabby and ugly ; you would forget its unworthiness in consideration of the gold. That's the way I try to encourage myself ; and I'm sure that if I can show that I have any golden truth to offer you, you won't refuse to receive it because I myself happen to be such a poor creature. Well, now I'll go on.'

'And God bless you, sir ! and I'm sorry I did it !' said the cock-crower, getting to his feet for a moment, and then sitting down again. And there was a general murmur of approval. Sebastian drew a long breath and folded the baby in his arms.

The sermon which ensued was certainly

not remarkable for eloquence or rhetoric, but there was something about it that caused its main points to reach the heart and fix themselves in the memory.

‘Of course I don’t suppose any of you would willingly hurt a little child,’ Smillet said. ‘Perhaps you wouldn’t even care to have them see you doing anything wicked, because you know they are innocent themselves, and you wouldn’t like to be the first to teach them wrong. When you are with them, you try to behave as if you were innocent like them. Only, if you were innocent, it could not be with their kind of innocence. There are two kinds of innocence: the innocence of not knowing any wrong, and the innocence of knowing it and yet not doing it, because it is against God’s command, which may be called the innocence of wisdom. Angels have that, and some angelic men and women have it, too; and that is the kind of innocence the Lord meant, when he said it opened the kingdom of heaven to a man. If you offend

against that innocence, it were better that a mill-stone were hanged about your neck.

‘What that means I take to be this. You know that anybody may see the truth with his mind, and talk of it, and yet secretly be doing wrong all the time—knowing it to be wrong. You may be a murderer, or a thief, or an adulterer in your heart, and yet behave and talk outwardly as if you were an angel. But if you do so, then you are committing crimes in the presence of little children—the children of your soul—the understanding of good and truth that you have got from the Bible. You are offending the little ones; it would be better for you if there were no little ones there. It is better for you, if you give yourselves up to evil deeds, to be evil in word as well as in deed; for otherwise you would profane what is holy, and that sin is deadly. It is so deadly that the Lord, who loves all men, mercifully prevents us from committing it by hanging a mill-stone about our neck, and drowning us in the depths of the sea. That is, when the Lord sees that a

man is given over to a life of evil, he gradually shuts off from him all knowledge and remembrance of what good is, and lets him sink into the depths of his own sinfulness, and forget heaven and the little children of heaven. It is his punishment which he brings upon himself; and yet it is a merciful punishment, for it prevents him from committing the sin against the little ones, which is unpardonable.

‘ So, although you may commit a crime, or a few crimes, and yet be able to think and talk of what is true, yet, if you keep on, by-and-by you will surely feel the mill-stone about your neck and the sea closing over your head. There are no hypocrites in hell; devils cannot live in the light of angels. Shouldn’t you think this a sad world if there were no children in it? Well, all evil men are childless, for though they may have children, they have nothing child-like in themselves. There can be no children in hell. God gives men children on earth—little earthly innocents—to make them think of

heaven and heavenly innocence. Sometimes He takes them away again ; but that will not make us childless if we have not offended them while they were here. It will be more likely to make us think of them when they are in the Lord's kingdom, and to try to make us imitate their purity and sinlessness, so that when we die we may find them again there.'

'Oh, ain't he one of the right sort?' muttered Prout in a husky voice, as the preacher sat down. Mrs. Blister and Mrs. Bartlet were both in tears, for they had lost their children years ago. Sebastian hugged his baby close in his arms, and said nothing.

Presently the time came for him to take the baby up to be baptised. Sebastian came forward to the pulpit, Prout and Mrs. Blister accompanying him, in the capacity of godfather and godmother. But when they arrived at the spot, they found Mary already standing there. She had seen Sebastian coming, and had divined his object. She greeted Sebastian quietly and gravely, and

gave her hand to Prout and Mrs. Blister. Smillet did not at first recognise Strome; but when he had done so, a broad smile broke out over his face, though his spectacles were dimmed. As the friends grasped each other's hands, he piped out :

‘ Dear old boy, I’m so glad you’ve come ! Not that I imagine I could teach you anything—but it’s so kind of you ! And I owe you so much already—for it was all owing to you that I went into this. I told you, you know, when we parted, that it would make a great difference in me ; and it has ! I’m as happy as a grig !’

But few more words were exchanged, for Sebastian felt very strangely, standing there as he did, with the persons around him who were associated with the several phases of his past life. The baptismal service began, what remained of the congregation looking on curiously and in silence. The baby, the central point of interest, appeared to take a great fancy to Smillet, and continually smiled and cooed at him. Mrs.

Blister anxiously expressed a hope that she would cry when the water touched her, observing that good behaviour under those circumstances was a sign of misfortune. But the baby seemed to be superior to omens, and perversely refused to uplift her little voice in lamentation. Sebastian went through his part of the ceremony with that sensation of double consciousness which often attends transactions in which much suppressed feeling is involved. He saw, as if from an outside point of view, himself with the baby in his arms; Prout on his left, slowly turning his cap in his large coarse hands, while staring fixedly at Smillet with his round blue eyes; Smillet, with his pale upright hair, his flat nose, and his naïve earnestness; Mrs. Blister, snuffling, dingy and solicitous; and the other godmother, with her stately figure, her noble downcast face, and her red-gold hair. The sacred words sounded in his ears, but their meaning scarcely reached him; the most living reality for him was the new little Mary herself, with

her infantine movements and murmurs,—she, and also another figure, invisible to the rest of the assemblage, but which often had visited Sebastian's dreams and reveries,—the figure of the baby's mother, who stood by the father's side, between him and Mary Fawley, and looked on voicelessly and wistfully. This scene always remained in Sebastian's memory; but Fanny Jackson never visited him again.

The ceremony was over; he shook hands with Smillet. Mary said, 'I shall see you again in a few days and talk with you.' Then he and Prout were out in the street, walking homewards as they came. He held his little Mary close against his heart, and felt that he had never really loved her till now. Prout was loquacious and cheerful, and talked of the sermon and of the baptism and of Mrs. Fawley; and admired the happy chance that had brought her thither on this day. But Sebastian said to himself that there was no such thing as chance; infinite love and wisdom directed all.

At one point of their route they paused at the divergence of two streets, while Prout debated which they should follow. One was shorter; the other was the more open and pleasant. Decision was finally made in favour of the former: so that the baby might the sooner get her dinner. They went onward, with no thought of calamity. The angel of the Lord, that angel who seems most terrible and is most kind, was waiting for them in the way; but the sun shone, and no omen warned them back. The street was poor, and nearly empty. By-and-by Prout exclaimed:

‘Well, I’m blessed! if this ain’t the very street where I punched that ’ere Fawley’s ’ead for him last spring!’

‘I wish you hadn’t done it!’ said Strome.

‘Well, so do I then; but I wa’n’t quite myself at the time. But if ’twas to do over agin, I’d leave him be!’

‘By the way,’ said Strome, after they had gone a little farther, ‘did you notice if there was any milk in the house before we started?’

Because, if not, we'd better get some on our way. Probably one of the pubs might have some.'

'A good idea too! And all in good time, this 'ere is the same pub as I got tight in that night. Will you go in, or shall I?'

'I'll go. You hold her meanwhile. Take good care of her!'

'Lord love her! she's al'ays good with her uncle Prout, ain't yer, sweet? Good-bye, daddy! Good-bye, daddy!'

Sebastian turned and smiled, and saw the baby smile; then he passed in to the private bar of the public house. There were a couple of men and a woman there, sipping spirits and conversing amicably. The landlord, with smug shaven face and complacent bearing, stood behind the bar, with his hands resting upon it and caressing it; Sebastian's request for milk seemed to surprise him; nevertheless, he took down an empty bottle and proceeded placidly to fill it. From outside was heard a sudden and loud clattering of horses' hoofs, sounding louder and nearer. 'Nother

runaway, by Geawge !' remarked the landlord, with a calm sigh. ' Drat 'em ! they runned over and most killed a poor old chap on'y last week. If 'e'd been in here, and taken his go of gin cold, it 'ud a bin better for 'im—what's that ?'

A sharp tangle of noises just outside the door, shouts, quick staggering of iron-shod hoofs, then a rapid gallop away again. Sebastian came out and stood in the doorway with one foot on the side-walk.

Prout was sitting in the gutter on the opposite side of the narrow street, his clothes disordered, his head hatless and bloody ; the baby in his arms. He looked dazed and ghastly. Sebastian said :

' What was it ? Thank God she wasn't hurt ! she wasn't——'

Prout glanced down at the quiet little form in his arms, then up again at Strome. His lips were drawn back from his teeth, which were set together edge to edge. He muttered clumsily, ' He's done for her—but I know'd 'im—it's Fawley—we'll have his heart out of him !'

‘Give her to me! Nonsense!’ said Sebastian, in a shrill, half-laughing tone. He went across the street and took the baby from Prout. ‘She’s not hurt; there’s no mark on her; she’s asleep, that’s all!’ he continued, in the same pithless voice, but more hurriedly. Then, all in a moment, his face seemed to shrivel up like a leaf; and a low, hoarse shriek, helplessly prolonged, issued from his faltering lips.



CHAPTER IX.

SELIM AGAINST THE WORLD.



N the morning of this Sunday Selim had risen earlier than usual, and had spent an hour before breakfast in his private room. Like other men of property and prosperity, he was not always able to bring the week's work to an end with the end of the week. There was the bank in the first place : by virtue of the capital at his disposal, and of the mother-wit which the injury to his cranium had rendered at worst but intermittent, he had become a trusted pillar of that institution. Then, there was his American business, which was extended

in other directions beside that of the waterproof blankets, and in which many thousand pounds of his money were embarked. Besides these, he had on hand a private transaction or two, presumably of good augury. Finally, why might not Fawley look forward to political honours? Jews were not yet in Parliament; but no person in polite society thought of calling Selim Fawley, Esq., of Dene Hall, a Jew! He might indeed condescend to be a Jew as to race; but he was too orthodox a man-of-the-world to be a Jew as to religion. 'I am an Englishman!' he would exclaim; and if he added, 'of Semitic extraction,' it was probably below his breath.

But if he were thus happy in his public relations, what shall be said of his private and domestic beatitude? His income from all sources was variously estimated at from twenty to forty thousand pounds. In addition to the Dene Hall estate, he had lately purchased and was decorating a splendid city mansion; and he was understood to possess shooting-boxes, with miles of shooting, in

various parts of the country. As to Mrs. Fawley, *née* Mary Dene, she was perhaps as worthy an appendage to so much grandeur as it was reasonable to look for. Into the privacy of a man's fireside nobody, of course, should pry too curiously; but to all appearance the couple lived together on exemplary terms. There were as yet no children, and Fawley was something of an invalid; but perfect happiness is vouchsafed to no mortal. Perhaps matters might mend in this respect too.

Shortly before the breakfast-hour Fawley touched a bell and bade the servant who answered it to tell Mrs. Sophia that he wanted her.

Aunt Sophia, it should be observed, had not yet been sent away to the enjoyment of a private cottage and income: Selim had found it convenient to have her with him—available at any moment. She had a business faculty and was not troublesome. Nay, she was useful, and no one was allowed to know more than she did of Selim's private affairs.

Perhaps Selim himself was scarcely aware how much she did know. She was demure, cool-headed, cynical, ready; in short, she supplied to Selim those qualities which had been impaired in him by his illness. She had a certain influence over him—more than before his marriage. Though not always treating her with ceremony and respect, he depended on her. Had she been the ordinary scheming unscrupulous gentlewoman-in-waiting, she might have distinguished herself about this time. But the good lady had one defect (in common with nine-tenths of the human race)—she lacked concentration of purpose. She could be affable, artful, secret, vindictive; she had tact, good temper, ingenuity, and spitefulness; yet with all these faculties and virtues she would never make her fortune, because she was deficient in original energy; she could act only on the instance of other people. Intrigue was pleasant to her, but she was too indolent to cultivate it solely on her own account. She was as a child with a rare apple-stealing

capacity, yet who stole only for the sake of an enterprising friend. The consequence was that the friend got the apples and left to the thief the consciousness of stealing well-performed. But some persons prefer the hunt to the quarry—the theft to the booty: and Aunt Sophia may have been happier in scheming and lying for Selim, than she would have been in the merely selfish exercise of those functions. She was at the same time too clever a woman not to be aware of her weakness, but she was in the habit of regarding it in the light of a self-sacrifice. ‘I am so devoted to those I love, that I will do more for them than for myself—I will even do wrong for them!’ ‘And enjoy doing it,’ she might have added; but why tell uncivil truths to yourself in private, when you are at pains to tell civil falsehoods to people less worthy of consideration?

But leaving further examination of the traits and nature of this interesting lady, let us listen to what passed between her and Selim in his private room.

‘Must go to town again to-day. See that the trap is ready to take me to the 9.45 train.’

‘To-day is Sunday, dear boy.’

‘All the better. I shall go on horseback from Queen’s Gate to Highbury. But confound the whole infernal business!’

‘The American, is it?’

‘Yes, and that blackguard Grannit! a precious pair of ’em!’

‘Look here, dear boy, are not we a match for them?’

‘You don’t know all the circumstances. You are a clever old creature, I know that, and you’ve helped me in a few tight places, too—but—! For all that, you would sell me up to the best bidder.’

‘Selim, dear, don’t take that line with me. It’s childish and rude; it’s not the way a man-of-the-world talks to women. It makes me distrust your judgment in other things; how can you know your enemies if you don’t know your friends? And you make enemies needlessly. There’s not a servant in the

house that doesn't hate the sight of you. It would matter less, if they didn't love Mary.'

'What do you mean?'

'Of course they know how you treat her when you get excited; and they side against you. Now, I would rather have Mary against me than her maid, any day: and so would you, if you were wise, my dear.'

'Why?'

'Because Mary is honourable and says what she means, and her maid isn't and doesn't. If Mary was like most wives—malicious and gossipy and revengeful—you would be harried out of house and home. You do behave outrageously to her, dear boy, and it's silly and wrong of you.'

'Who says I behave outrageously? What do you know?'

Aunt Sophia crossed her handsome feet, and looked keenly at Selim from between her narrowed eyelids. 'I came into her chamber unexpectedly the other day, when she had her dress off: and I saw a great black-and-blue mark—you know where!

She covered it up directly; but I saw it. And then I knew the meaning of that noise I heard the night before.'

'I didn't mean to do it—didn't know what I was doing. When I get worked up that way, I don't know anything. Nobody can tell what I suffer, nor how much I have to bother me. And you're all against me!'

'You are against yourself, my dear—that's your trouble! You are a hypochondriac—you fancy your friends are your enemies. Mary and I are the only friends you've got, and you treat us vilely; and it's lucky for you that we put up with it. Do you know, dear boy, that that wife of yours could take you up in one hand and shake the life out of you? You never had half her strength in your best days; but now—! Instead of that she stands still and lets you . . . well, it is outrageous of you, Selim. She has changed since she was married; I used to think she would live to murder somebody; but she has changed; else she would have killed you as she did her father's prize bull, years ago.

Mrs. Strome has had a good deal to do with it : she has made Mary religious ; and religion is a good thing to have in a house—religion like Mary's, I mean. It makes her care for you—in a religious way, of course. Heaven knows, dear boy, she has little enough reason to care for you on other grounds.'

'That is just what maddens me ! I can't make her either hate or love me. I can't get near her—I never could : but now it's worse than before I married her. I seem to touch her only when I play the devil : for there is a devil in her somewhere, and sometimes I can make it peep out of her for a moment. Then I feel as if I'd got her ! If she would let that devil peep out a little oftener and easier, he wouldn't come out so often in me !'

Aunt Sophia smiled curiously. 'I see what you mean. The only part of your wife that you are in sympathy with is the devilish part, and you can't be happy with her unless that is in sight. Rather an odd fault to find with a woman ! If you were to succeed in provoking her to spring at you and strangle

you to death, I suppose you would feel quite at ease with her, as a husband should be. A funny world, dear boy, is it not ?

‘Come, Sophia, I won’t be laughed at by you! You’d better hold your tongue about Mary, too. Else you pack out of this house, do you hear!’

‘Yes, my dear ; and it’s a mystery to me why I don’t take you at your word. I am an old enough woman now to have found out the values of things. I like comfort, of course, but if you lived in a hole in the ground, I believe I should live with you just the same as I do here. I don’t like being alone : and you are the only company I can have in this world : I don’t say the best, or the most agreeable. I am often very much put out both with you and Mary ; she is so haughty and autocratic—she used to be, at least ; but I must admit she has become more considerate of late, though very cold. But as for you, my dear, you are intolerable, and you take no pains to be otherwise. We put up with it, but if you only knew how much

you have to thank us for! Mary, as I told you, could shake the life out of you with one hand; and as for me, though I don't look so terrible, still I could . . .'

She paused, and Selim said, in a bantering tone :

'Well, what could you do?—let us hear.'

He had been leaning back in his chair, gloomily biting his fingernails, and playing a tattoo with the heels of his boots on the floor. He now glanced up at Aunt Sophia.

'Well, for instance, I could state the chances for and against your being in Spain or America a month from now; or else in an English—shall I say it?'

Selim looked at her for a long time, his features twitching, and the heels of his boots quiescent. At last he inquired :

'Are there two keys to my desk?'

'Nothing of the sort, dear boy.'

'Then what are you talking about?'

'You said just now that I was a clever woman, but you don't seem to consider how much that may mean. I can carry on a con-

secutive train of thought. I don't need a key to your desk ; I can draw conclusions, and besides, I have been the wife of your uncle, who was much like you—poor Joshua ! He never had your luck, but he would have known better how to keep it, if he had. Don't look so disturbed, my dear ; your secrets are safer—I'm afraid—with me than with you.'

'How long have you——?'

'I saw how things were going before you did. But never mind now. It's time for breakfast, and——'

'Confound breakfast ! I say, Sophia, it will be all right. I have bluffed those fellows already, and I shall do it again to-day. There's no real danger. Greater risks are run every day.'

'Of course it may turn out well,' said the lady, drily ; 'but if it doesn't, what are you going to do with Mary?'

'She won't miss me much !' said Selim, with a lifting of his upper lip.

'Then you wouldn't take her with you?'

‘She wouldn’t go ; you know that.’

‘Well, women under the influence of religion never will go so far as others, unless they’re in love ! but then they wouldn’t be religious. However, she might the estate is hers to dispose of, you know.’

Selim shook his head slowly.

‘I should be no better off if she did,’ he finally said. ‘Virtuous penury would be worse than Spain or America. And I’d rather she kept it than that they got it, damn ’em !’

‘Where you go, I go, my dear,’ Aunt Sophia remarked, after another pause. ‘You are very like my poor old Joshua. You’ll need some one to look after you.’

‘It’s certain Mary wouldn’t have you with her !’ said Selim, rudely. Aunt Sophia gave a short laugh and bit her lip. He continued : ‘And you’d be more trouble to me than you are worth.’

‘How like Joshua ! But the time came when he would scream out like a baby if I left him for a moment ; and he died holding

my hand, so that I could hardly get it away when he was cold. You are so like him, my dear!

‘You old death-watch!’ cried Selim, getting up with a disturbed look. ‘Don’t you know better than to talk that way to a man in my nervous condition? I hope to mercy I may have a better face than yours to look my last at!’ He checked himself, and added, in a quavering tone: ‘I say, Sophia, what’s the use of thinking about such things? It will be all right, I tell you! Only don’t talk about dying, and my being like that infernal husband of yours! Take a cheerful view of things.’

Aunt Sophia leaned her wrinkled cheek on her hand, and contemplated Selim thoughtfully.

‘You ought never to have married, dear boy,’ she observed. ‘You were never fit for it, and you’ve made a sad mess of it. What good has her money done you? What good has anything done you? You never had much manliness, and now what little you had

is gone. I wish I had given Mary that letter that Sebastian Strome wrote her, to prevent her marrying you—it would have been better for both of you. However, the mischief is done, and we must manage the best we can about it. Lock up those papers, my dear, and come in to breakfast.’

Selim selected one paper from the rest, before closing his desk, and handed it to Aunt Sophia. It was a sheet of blue commercial note, written over three sides. Aunt Sophia put up her eyeglasses and scrutinised it.

‘What is this—Greek or Arabic? I can’t make out a word of it.’

Selim snickered craftily. ‘You’d be clever if you could! That’s a cipher that only one man in the world besides myself can read.’

‘Who is the one man?’

‘Sebastian Strome; he invented it, and taught it to me when we were at Oxford.’

‘Well, and what have you written here?’

‘A memorandum, that’s all! Only I would as soon put my head in a noose as translate that memorandum into plain English—or

Arabic either ! Give it back to me. I shall take it with me to-day, to refer to during my interview with those two fellows ; for my memory sometimes goes just when I most want it. What would they give to be able to read that, do you suppose ? Half a million ?

‘ Better trust to your memory, my dear, and burn the memorandum. There is no telling what might happen. Sebastian may have taught the cipher to some one else.’

Selim, however, put the paper in his pocket.

‘ I’ll risk it !’ he said, wagging his head up and down. ‘ Strome is in Australia, or California, or dead, very likely ; and nobody in England can read it. Well, we’ll go to breakfast. My head feels better. I know what I’m about ! it will come out all right ! I can make those fellows do what I please.’


Aunt Sophia made no reply, but was not reassured. These abrupt alternations of mood, from gloom to fear, and from fear to audacity and cheerfulness, were characteristic of Selim’s malady, and made him difficult to manage. There could be no safety in such

flightiness : what he did in one state of mind he might undo in another. In public, indeed, he contrived in great measure to disguise these sinister shiftings—reserving their free development for the delectation of his wife and Aunt Sophia. But whether he disguised them or not, their effect upon his conduct was equally undesirable. As Aunt Sophia followed him into the breakfast-room, she told herself : ‘ It is a marvel he has escaped so well as he has ! ’ But beyond a certain point, her knowledge of his affairs was little more than conjecture. She knew less than she had led Selim to imagine she did. But the conjectures of some people are more apt to be accurate than the punctual information of others.



CHAPTER X.

HUSH !

T breakfast it transpired that Mary also was going to London ; so the phaeton was ordered instead of the trap ; and the husband and wife drove together to the station, and were bowed into a private compartment by the obsequious guard. Selim was in capital spirits, and made himself entertaining. Mary had intended telling him how she had met Sebastian the day before ; but his volubility left her no opportunity to do so, or else it chased the matter from her mind. As she listened to Selim and observed him, she felt a great

tenderness and compassion towards him. With all her heart she forgave him many nameless and irretrievable wrongs: even as she had forgiven them before, and would forgive them again. But she said to herself that Selim was full of amiable and engaging qualities; that he might have been altogether charming and good; but he had been unfortunate; he had been wronged and injured in his defenceless boyhood; he had suffered from evil example and instruction; what was bad in him had been called forth, and what was good suppressed. Through the muddy and distorted medium of the actual Selim she tried to see and to sympathise with the ideal Selim; and she blamed herself because the effort was great. 'I ought to have helped him more,' she thought; 'I should have done more to counteract the harm he has suffered.' And she hoped to succeed better in the future. She always remembered that Sunday journey in the train to London. It was a comparatively bright hour in their married life.

At the London terminus they parted, Mary walking to Smillet's tabernacle, while Selim repaired to the mansion in Queen's Gate, and there mounted his favourite bay mare Jenny. He was fond of riding and was a good horseman ; and the exercise had been recommended to him as beneficial for his health. He mounted and cantered away towards the north and east, taking a somewhat roundabout route, so as to avoid traffic. As he rode along, his mind was fixed tenaciously on the approaching interview, and he rehearsed in imagination both his own part and that of the others. At last he said : ' A week will be enough : and a week I am certain of ! ' Then he touched the mare with the spur, and a few minutes later he dismounted at the gate of a small detached villa, secluded in the midst of its little garden, and surrounded with high brick walls. Leaving his mare in charge of the servant who opened the gate, he walked up the pathway to the house, and was cordially welcomed by the two gentlemen who were sitting by the open

window looking upon the lawn. One of these gentlemen had a long black cigar in his mouth, and his feet were upon the window-sill; the other held an old-fashioned gold snuff-box in his left hand, and took a pinch with indolent grace as he smiled a greeting.

Selim chatted with his two friends for about an hour. A number of documents were brought out and consulted. Pens and ink were brought into requisition. Afterwards a bottle of capital Madeira was produced, and two or three glasses were drunk. An invitation to stay to lunch was declined by the smiling Selim; and then he found himself once more on his mare's back, pursuing his way back to Queen's Gate. The momentous interview was over. Had he been successful? Every word and episode that had passed were tingling in his memory. At intervals he repeated half aloud: 'I have got my week though! and a week will be enough. What shall I say to Mary? Nothing! Confound that Madeira, it has made my head bad!'

Jenny was an excellent mare, nearly thoroughbred, and ordinarily kind enough; but she was nervous and unsteady this morning. Selim took her down through some of the poorer streets of the city, lest he should run across people coming from church. He was not riding with as much judgment as usual; his head had begun to trouble him. Once or twice he was nearly in collision with something. At length, in a narrow turning, he ran sharp against a woman who was standing in the middle of the pavement, conversing with another woman in a first-storey window. The former scrambled out of the way; but the latter, with vicarious spite, aimed at Selim the contents of a saucepanful of greasy hot water, which happened to be standing on the window-sill. The water missed Selim, but splashed on Jenny's hind-quarters. She bolted, and her rider temporarily lost control over her. They dashed into another street, and now again somebody was in the way—a man this time, with a white bundle of something in his arms. The man, in his efforts to

escape, got almost under the mare's feet ; she reared, and one of her fore-hoofs grazed his head, and, glancing thence, struck that white bundle which he carried. Then, with a savage shout, the man sprang at Selim and caught him by the coat ; his fingers hitched on the inside pocket as the coat flew open ; the wrench nearly pulled the rider from his seat, and pocket and lining were torn away. In the same moment Selim recognised Prout, and also knew, for the first time, that it was Prout's voice which had said ' Take that ! ' on that dark night in March when his troubles began. He felt a spasm of joy at seeing the blood flow down Prout's face ; and he would have tried to revenge himself still further, but Jenny leaped forward again, and Prout and the street were left behind. The whole incident had lasted scarcely ten seconds.

Half an hour later Selim arrived at his house in Queen's Gate, feeling excited and flurried from his adventure. His pocket was torn out, and the cipher memorandum was gone ; but it had served its purpose for him,

and no one who found it could make any use of it ; certainly Prout could not. ‘ The coat will need a new lining,’ said Selim to himself ; ‘ but as a set off, Prout’s head will need a new coating !’ He made himself quite merry over this conceit ; and as he walked upstairs, chuckling to himself, he came face to face with his wife on the landing.

‘ You here already !’ he exclaimed. ‘ All the better ; we’ll lunch together, and I’ll tell you my adventures. Do you recollect my telling you that the fellow who hit me on the head last spring said, “ Take that !” and that I recognised his voice, but couldn’t for the life of me think whom it belonged to ? Well, to-day I found out, and I gave the scamp as good as he gave me—at least Jenny did, with her off fore-foot. We ran him down in a little back street somewhere. He had a bundle in his arms—it looked like a baby, now I think of it—I hope it was one !—at all events it prevented him from getting out of the way quick enough, and Jenny reared and smashed him and his bundle too. He was

all over blood in a moment—he, he, he !’

Mary could not help looking a little revolted ; but Selim was not abashed.

‘Now who do you suppose it was ?’ he demanded, throwing himself down in a chair, and laying his riding-whip on the table beside him. They had entered the parlour while he had been talking. ‘Well, I’ll tell you,’ he continued, crossing his legs and clasping his hands over his head. ‘It was that devil Prout, who was in my service last year.’

At the name ‘Prout,’ Mary experienced a sudden check and reversal of the current of feeling. It was a name which bound together things seemingly unrelated, and fetched them home to her heart with a shock. During the moment that elapsed after Selim ceased speaking and before she answered him, her mind made a wide excursion. On its return it fixed itself fearfully on one point.

‘A baby ?’

‘It looked very like one,’ said Selim, beginning to chuckle again. ‘If it was, it won’t need a doctor, I fancy! But I didn’t know Prout was a Benedict!’

‘Are you certain it was Prout?’ Mary asked between two quick breaths.

Selim uncrossed his legs and rubbed his hands over his forehead. ‘My head is bad again. Oh, I knew the blackguard, and he knew me! He tore my pocket out, and my memorandum—however, it was worth it!’

But Mary’s eyes were darkening and kindling, and she was becoming conscious of the first stirrings within her of something terrible—something which she had always obscurely known to be lurking deep in her nature. It grew, it heaved her bosom, it brought with it the conviction of power—power of her will and personality over all things—over Selim—nay, over herself! For what was that other impulse, urging her to let Selim escape and save himself while there was time? That merciful impulse faltered and was thrust back—and yet it was herself. But it was the religious

self that had been generated and cherished by Mrs. Strome, and by the co-operation of Mary's own diviner energy. As opposed to the sudden tyranny of this new self (which yet was not new but primeval—old as the Deluge or as Cain), it was an infant against a giant. The giant had bided long in apathy and darkness, but now his hour was come. Selim's unconsciousness of all this was pitiable.

'Did you see the man who was with Prout?' his wife asked.

The deeper tone of her voice caused him to look up: he stared at her for a moment, and then said rudely:

'What the devil is the matter with you?'

'Sebastian Strome was with him. That baby was Sebastian's. I was its godmother at the baptism this morning: it was named Mary after me.'

These sentences were spoken slowly, Mary standing tall, quiet, her hands clasped behind her.

'It's a—damned—lie!' ejaculated Selim;

not because he really thought it was a lie, but because he could not immediately dare to believe that Strome had been at such close quarters with him. In a few moments, during which only his heavy and uneven breathing was audible, he broke out: 'If it was his baby, I'm glad of it, and I'm glad it's dead. What's all that about baptism and—do you mean to say you've seen and spoken with Strome? Have you? Answer me—no lying, now!' vociferated the infatuated man.

There was the grave composure of fate in Mary's air and attitude. A strange, poignant delight swelled her heart, and made her breath come long and pleasantly. The deed, which she saw but a few minutes further on in the future, was indeed a costly luxury, but it was worth the cost. The humiliation of self which she had striven through many miserable months to accomplish was gone for ever; and with a mighty uplifting of all senses and faculties, the down-trampled nature towered aloft once more—the old Adam and the old Eve, more ripe than ever

for revolt and mischief. And yet, only twenty-four hours ago, the woman who stood there had fought against and conquered what might seem a more subtle and dangerous temptation than this. And this very morning, her heart had been overflowing with gentle and holy thoughts. But it is not Satan's way to give warning of his approach. He does not wait for invitation or for justification ; but suddenly he is present, and settles himself only the more securely because he had no right to come.

'Are you going to answer me?' called out Selim again.

'I have seen Sebastian,' said Mary, dwelling upon the name with a tenderness that her husband had never heard. 'We were together in my carriage yesterday. To-day we sang together, and I held his baby in my arms and kissed her.'

'You did, eh?' cried Selim, with an oath. 'And you kissed him too, no doubt ! You're in love with him ! Come, confess it !'

'I do love Sebastian,' Mary said, with a proud smile, 'and he loves me.'

Selim's fury broke loose. He jumped to his feet and caught up his riding-whip. The handle was weighted with a heavy knob of twisted silver. He raised it over his wife's head. She looked him in the eyes, still smiling.

'You struck me once before, Selim, and I submitted. Do you think I will submit now?'

'Go down on your knees and beg my pardon, or——'

The whip came down the next moment with all the force that Selim could put into the blow. Mary, with a swift but unhurried movement, caught it in her hand and possessed herself of it. Selim's arm sank to his side, and for the first time his eyes were opened to see the purpose in his wife's face. His fingers turned cold, and his heart became as water within him.

'You should have died before this,' Mary said; 'but now that you have heard my secret, you must die. You must not know that Sebastian and I love each other, and live afterwards.'

‘You may love whom you like—I know you never loved me—but for God’s sake don’t look at me that way!’

‘I don’t know why I have let you live so long!’ Mary continued, gazing at him unmoved. ‘You have more than killed me—you have married me! But now I will be Mary Dene, not Mary Fawley!’

‘You don’t mean that you would murder me?’

‘Yes. Make no noise. Hush!’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, don’t look so! What have I done? I couldn’t help what Jenny did! And now I’m ruined—bankrupt—I’m going to fly the country! And I did love you, Mary—dearest, sweetest Mary! on my oath——’

‘Hush! I cannot save you.’

She came a step nearer to him.

‘You may have him, I tell you! You may have Strome! I won’t stand in your way. I’ll bring him to you if you say so! I shall be gone day after to-morrow, and leave you free, and I shall never come back. Stop, I’ll

show you in my memorandum—no, I lost it—Prout—Strome—oh my God !

His face suddenly became purplish, his eyes bloodshot; he put his hands to his throat and fumbled with his neckcloth. ‘He knows the cipher—betray me!’ came from him in a strangling voice. He bent his body backwards, overbalanced himself, spun round once or twice, and fell heavily across a chair with his face up.

Mary stooped forward and looked at the face for nearly a minute. Then she let the whip fall to the floor, and turned slowly away. And, when she was turned, she saw Smillet standing in the door-way with his hat in his hand.



CHAPTER XI.

WATCHMAN, WHAT OF THE NIGHT?



STROME and Prout sat side by side on the bed in the little room at Spitalfields, and looked at the coffin that lay upon a chair between them and the window. This was the first opportunity they had had for undisturbed conversation since the fatal event of the previous day. Prout had proved himself invaluable; he had done everything; but for him, especially during those few first hours, it would have fared ill with Strome. There had been little rest and less sleep for either of them; but now all preparations were made, and they

were waiting for the waggon that was to convey the coffin to the railway station. The baby was to be buried beside its mother in Cedarhurst Churchyard.

One side of Prout's face was discoloured with a bruise, and his head was bandaged up with a black cloth ; but of the two men Strome looked the more exhausted and cast down. The pallor of his face and the hollowness of his cheeks were the more apparent owing to his beard having been shaved off ; the top of his head was nearly bald, and he was as a man past middle age and enfeebled by illness. He was clad in a fashionably made suit of black, for the clothes which he had deposited at the pawnbroker's on taking up his abode at Spitalfields, had been that morning re-deemed. Prout likewise was respectably dressed. Life in a London slum was about to become a thing of the past for them both. The five hundred pounds had found its use.

‘ We didn't think to be leavin' the old place this way, did we, sir ? ’ observed Prout ; ‘ nor

we didn't think we'd 'a' met 'ere as we done, arter the way we parted at poor Fanny's grave. Well, we'll see the dear little kid safe beside its ma, and then we'll get even with Fawley. And as touchin' that, I got an idea.'

'What?'

'This way. Last week I got bespoke for a plumbin' job over to one of they grand 'ouses in the West End—Queen's Gate. A cove have just bought it, and is 'avin' things done to it—halterations made and that. Well, this very mornin' I found out, accidental, who that cove is. Fawley be the man, and none else! which I calls Providential!'

'Providential?'

'Yes. Do yer see what I'm drivin' at?'

'No.'

'Well, it's this. Whilst I'm about my work at the 'ouse, and nobody suspectin' nothin', what do I do? I takes a winder fastenin or the lock of a door, and I makes it so as I can get into the 'ouse whenever I

pleases—and that'll be in the night time. So I gets in in the night time, and then—there I be !

Sebastian gave a dreary smile.

'What can you rob Fawley of that would pay us for the baby? Would a gold watch do it, or a million of money?'

'It's not robbin' as I was thinkin' on, Mr. Strome,' replied Prout, in a lower and sterner tone.

Sebastian made no rejoinder. His senses were dulled to apathy. He sighed, and resumed his listless, brooding attitude.

Prout leaned over towards him, and whispered a word or two in his ear. Sebastian turned slowly round, and looked fixedly at his companion. There was a pause. At last Sebastian muttered, dropping his eyes:

'I did not think of that !'

'I made up my mind to it the first minute I see her lyin' dead in my arms. "An eye for an eye!" says I; "blood for blood!" And on that I finds out what I telled yer

about the 'ouse at Queen's Gate—and Providential I calls it !

'It could be done,' muttered Sebastian again, with a heaving of the breast.

'In course it can, and shall ! Blood for blood—that's our game, and there's scripiter for it too ! 'Ave 'im up before a jury, now, and what would they do ? Bring 'im in manslaughter at the worst : maybe fine him five quid for fur'ous ridin'. No, thank ye ! We knows he murdered that blessed little innocent, and we can take revenge on 'im as it oughter be took. Lor' bless yer ! I just walks into his chamber, him asleep—well, it'll be my turn then ! And all anybody 'll know 'll be it's done—and good riddance ! And then what do you do ? Why, you goes off and you marries Miss Dene, like a bird !

Sebastian with outthrust face and lips pressed close, gazed before him at the grimy window-pane. He thought of all the treacherous wrong that Fawley had done him—which never could be told, and overt

wrong beside. He told himself that Fawley deserved death, and that his death must prove a blessing to all who knew him, and to Mary most of all. Fawley had deprived him of all that was most precious to him in the world, of that which had heretofore preserved him from moral if not also from physical death : of that which had comforted him and blessed him, which had awakened his heart to unselfish love, and had begun to lead him from darkness towards the light. To be thus robbed was to lose more than life ; what retaliation on the robber would be too severe ? ‘ Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord ;’ but must not God’s vengeance be accomplished through a human instrument ? ‘ Thou shalt do no murder !’ but was the infliction of just retribution, murder ? Human law could not adequately punish Fawley ; was that a reason why he should escape punishment ? Nay, must not the divinely selected means of his punishment be none other than the man whom he had outraged, and who would thus not only perfectly fulfil

the claims of justice as regarded the criminal, but would himself gain such consolation as only personal retaliation can afford ?

It was characteristic of the intellectual side of Strome's nature to indulge in these casuistical sophistries ; and it was not less characteristic of him on the side of the passions to sweep all such cobwebs contemptuously aside, and to sneer at their vain hypocrisy. He stood up, and his weariness fell from him ; he had forgotten Prout, and saw only his enemy, and himself standing over him ; and the *non sequitur* wherewith he capped his cunning argument was :

‘ I will kill him because I hate him, right or wrong !’

‘ That's the talk !’ said Prout, with sombre approval. ‘ But take it easy, sir. Time enough. We've to put the little kid underground fust, yer know.’

Sebastian held himself motionless for a few moments, as if hearkening to a far-off and unexpected sound. Then he turned fiercely on the speaker.

‘What are you? What have you to do with it?’

‘Nigh as much as yourself, Mr. Strome,’ returned Prout, surprised and taken aback. ‘You may ’ave cared for her a bit more nor me, bein’ her own father; but I cared for her enough to bear an ’and in gettin’ even with him as killed her.’

‘Don’t you presume to lay a finger on him! He belongs to me!’

Prout stared. Sebastian had never before used this overbearing tone towards him. What had come over him? He looked not like himself; the unevenness of his visage was exaggerated, and the divergence in his eyes increased. It was not an agreeable look. He seemed, in a sinister way, transfigured.

‘Well, no offence, sir,’ Prout said at length. ‘The most I thought was to save ye trouble; and when it comes over me as I’ve seen the last of the dear little kid, it seems like I must do somethin’.’

‘Seen the last of her!’ Sebastian repeated, hoarsely.

He turned to the little coffin, and placed his hands upon it. Presently he said again, in a shaken voice: ‘Seen the last of her? My little baby! Oh no!’ He got down by the coffin, passed one arm over it, and laid his cheek upon it.

‘There—’ave a good cry! you’ll be the better for it!’ Prout suggested, amicably.

‘I couldn’t bear never to see her again,’ said the other hurriedly.

‘Eh?’ exclaimed Prout, puzzled.

The other continued without noticing him:

‘I won’t be childless! I must see her again! Smillet said murderers are childless.’

Prout hesitated meditatively several moments before saying:

‘That’s ’ow it is, Mr. Strome; so do you leave it to me and think no more about it. I never had no children and never want to ’ave; so it won’t matter to me as fur as that goes. It won’t ’urt me, don’t yer know, like

it would you. That's it! It was me thought of the job, and 'tis me must do it.'

Sebastian clung so closely to the little coffin that it vibrated slightly with the vibrations that were shaking his body. Drops of sweat grew slowly on his white face; his teeth were clenched together, and he kept muttering between them such sentences as 'What shall I do! Oh—oh, God help me! Oh—oh my baby—my little darling!' His trembling became more uncontrollable. Prout eyed him watchfully.

Suddenly he half rose on his knees and said, in a voice sunk almost to a whisper, but with startling rapidity and energy :

'Prout, we must think about something else. Do you understand—do you see? We must think about something else—now—quick!'

'I'm game, sir; but what be it?'

'What shall it be—yes—anything will do; it makes no difference! But if we keep on talking about killing him, it will be too late—it will be done—and then we shall lose the baby. I will tell you some story—that will

do—something long—let me see! Have you ever heard of Saint Augustine? Ah, that will do! He lived more than a thousand years ago—not so very long after Christ. When he was a child he had to study Greek and Latin; he liked Latin well enough, but he hated Greek; he couldn't understand why, but it was so. Well, then, when he was about sixteen he went to Carthage, and studied rhetoric there; he became a great scholar; but he couldn't get hold of any religion that suited him. He was very proud of his intellect and his learning, too. He got into all manner of dissipated habits; and—he—he got in at night by the window and found him in the chamber asleep, and waked him up and killed him—with a knife or a pistol, it's all the same to me—stop!—no! Have I been talking about that all this time? What have I been saying?

“You was tellin' as 'ow this cove—Saint August——”

‘That's it! that's right! Don't let me forget again! because—— He cried out

for Truth! Truth! But he gave his mind to false philosophy, and believed in himself—all evil and vanity, though he was a saint afterwards. His mother was full of anxiety about him—used to pray for him, and all that sort of thing; so one night—one night—one night——’

‘Look out! You’ll be at it again, sir! It’s this ’ere saint, yer know!’

‘Oh, yes! She dreamt she was standing on a wooden Rule, and weeping; and a shining youth came towards her and asked her why she wept? She answered that she bewailed her son’s perdition. But the angel told her to be content, for that where she was there would be her son also. So she looked round, and there was her son standing by her on the same Rule. Well, that turned out to be prophetic; for after nine years, during which he lived deceiving himself and others, and cultivating knowledge for the sake of power—after this—his little daughter was killed in the street by——’

‘No, no, sir; wrong agin—that’s another

story. Arter nine years, you was sayin', this 'ere August chap——'

'God!—yes, he was at Rome a long time, teaching in the schools there, and persuading himself that he desired very earnestly to know the true religion ; but he still kept to his dissolute life, and the truth was as far from him as ever. But one day he went into the garden with his friend Alypius ; and there he began to be in great trouble and anguish of mind, and said, " The unlearned take heaven by force, while we who are learned wallow in flesh and blood. Are we ashamed to follow those who are gone before, and are we not ashamed to lag behind ?" Then he saw that he could not know God until he had abandoned the evil of his life ; he must choose between his courtesans and his Saviour. He struggled with himself a long time, terribly hard ; he heard the evil calling to him and persuading him, but he kept on struggling against it, and by-and-by the sound of it became a little fainter. At last he flung himself down under

a fig-tree, weeping and praying, "Let it be now! let it be now!" Then, from a neighbouring house, he heard the voice of a young girl singing, "Take up and read! take up and read!" At that he stopped weeping, and got up and returned to where his friend Alypius was sitting, and took up the Bible that lay there on the bench, and read in it—some verse that brought serenity to his heart, and made his darkness vanish away.'

'What might that be?'

'I forget; and it's no matter now; for I feel better, too. It's over, Prout—thank God!'

'I got that 'ere little Bible we used yesterday in my pocket,' the other continued, fumbling for it. 'Here, mebbe you could strike upon the verse—just to give the story a wind-up, don't yer know!'

Sebastian took the book and opened it. A folded piece of blue paper, written over with a strange character, had got between the leaves, and caused them to divide naturally at a certain page. Strome's eyes fell

upon this passage: 'Oh thou wicked servant! I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me. Shouldst not thou also have had compassion on thy fellow-servant, even as I had pity on thee?'

'Be that his verse?' Prout inquired, as Sebastian closed the book.

'No, that was for us. Come, Prout, you must help me.'

'What to do, sir?'

'We must forgive Fawley; not say it only, but do it!'

'Forgive 'im? I thought you was goin' to say——'

'I say, forgive him: it must be done!'

'Easier said nor done, Mr. Strome. What! —that little coffin filled and he not be punished for it?'

Sebastian winced: but his struggle had been fought out, and it was not to be revived. 'Fawley could not have meant to hurt her,' he said steadily. 'And even if he had, we should be fools to think that we could avenge her by hurting him. There's no use dis-

puting about it, Prout, dear fellow: we don't want to offend our little one, as Smillet said, or we should be lost to her for ever.'

'Suppose we didn't live no more anywheres, arter we died? We'd lose her then, whether or no, d'yer see: and then shouldn't we feel awfully done that we 'adn't taken it out o' Fawley?'

'Do you love the baby still, Prout?'

'Do I? Don't I——'

'Well, then, that proves she must be alive somewhere, for you cannot love what does not exist. And if she lives, we shall. But unless we can forgive Fawley, we had better never have lived at all.'

Prout sat silent for a while, reflectively biting the thick skin of his knuckles. At last he said, with a half-discontented grunt, 'I can't talk agin you, Mr. Strome, and it's not expected. As for lettin' Fawley alone, if you say so, so it be, for it's more your affair nor mine. But if forgivin' him means that he don't deserve to get 'is nut knocked

off—well, then I'm free to say it ain't in me, and I'll not lie about it!

'What he deserves is none of our business, you see. It is certain that you can never have so much to forgive to the worst man you know, as God has to forgive to the greatest saint that ever lived. For my part, I don't feel secure enough about my own debts to make trouble about what is owing to me. So I shall wish that Fawley may become a good fellow; and I shall leave it to the Lord who created him to make him wish so too.'

'In course, I suppose you're right,' said the reluctant Prout; 'and I ain't a-going to risk lettin' a blackguard like that keep her away from me both in this world and t'other; so I'll forgive him the best I know 'ow, and much good may it do 'im!' Having thus made his sacrifice, and brooded over it a little, he added, with great emphasis: 'On'y one thing!—if the baby was alive agin, and all right and well like she was yesterday at this time—bless her little 'eart!—then I'll be

damned if I'd forgive him! and that I'll stick to!

'Shake hands on it, as it is,' said Sebastian, rising from his position beside the coffin. 'You are a better fellow than you think you are. I did want to kill him, with all my heart! A lucky thing I thought of telling about Saint Augustine!'

'Ah! Saint Augustine! What time ago was you sayin' he lived?'

'About fifteen hundred years.'

'Fifteen 'undred years! Yes, he done a lot o' good for a chap as lived fifteen 'undred years ago! I wonder does he know it?—For I seems to feel somehow comfortabler hinside me, arter all; and so do you, Mr. Strome, if your face be any sign of it.'



CHAPTER XII.

‘I AM AFRAID.’



SOON after noon the waggon arrived at the door. It was a tolerably respectable vehicle—the best that Prout had been able to engage at such short notice. It was covered over with an arched top, and had two seats, one for the driver, and another within for passengers. Prout occupied the former place, with the driver; Sebastian taking his place within, with the coffin across his knees. They were to proceed in this fashion to the London railway-station: but at Cedarhurst they would be met by a hearse and carriage.

It was a cloudy day, with a slight omnipresent drizzle: the city was dim in the moisture-laden atmosphere, but the noises of the streets sounded harder and sharper than usual. Everywhere was a bobbing surface of glistening umbrella-tops; with ever and anon the soaked shoulders or draggled petticoat of some wretch not a member of the umbrella-bearing community. No one looked at the waggon and its occupants, except an occasional policeman, who eyed them with unsympathetic glance, as if suspecting them to be at the bottom of the present disagreeable state of things.

Sebastian felt very forlorn. In spite of what he had said to Prout, during their discussion of the forenoon, touching hopes of Heaven and eternal life, it now seemed to him that all his possibilities of happiness were on their way to the churchyard along with the small coffin that rested across his knees. That coffin, if it did not hold the baby herself, at all events contained all that he had ever seen or would ever know of her

—except the poignant memory and the undying regret. She was too much to lose all at once. He could endure to lose her, if endurance meant a mute acceptance of the inevitable; but he could not afford to lose her, if there was to be anything in his life beyond mere existence.

He was falling back into the apathetic condition out of which he had been temporarily roused by Prout's proposal, and the conflict of emotions and purposes thence resulting. If he had anticipated that the exercise of Christian forbearance, in the face of temptation, would be followed by any lasting consolation of mind or heart, he had by this time found out his mistake. He had acted a Christian part; had refrained, and caused Prout to refrain, from taking revenge on their enemy; and had forgiven him. But all this exertion of virtue had merely been as the loss of so much life-blood. It was a deed of Christian charity, but its effect upon the doer was not vivifying but deadening. If it had benefited anybody, that person was

apparently Prout. Prout seemed to be in tolerably good spirits: he chatted briskly with the driver, and had the air of not being unduly oppressed by the weather or the situation. By and by he turned himself in his seat and addressed Sebastian.

‘Did you bring the little Bible along with you, sir?’

‘Yes; do you want it.’

‘Not me! But when you was readin’ that ’ere verse this morning, did you notice a bit of paper folded up—blue paper it was?’

‘Is this what you mean?’

‘That be the thing itself. You don’t know where that come from, now?’

‘I found it in the New Testament.’

Prout leaned over the back of the seat, and stretched his mouth towards Sebastian’s ear.

‘It come out o’ that beast Fawley’s pocket, what I tore away yesterday. I couldn’t read what’s wrote on it—mebbe it’s no account. It’s some furrin lingo, by the looks of it, but you understan’s them sort of things, so——’

‘It is no business of ours!’ interrupted the other. ‘If this belonged to Fawley, we must send it back to him when——Humph! it’s a cipher . . . What’s this?’

‘I know’d you could do it,’ remarked Prout, with a sort of pride of proprietorship in his friend’s erudition; and he resumed his chat with the driver.

But Sebastian was absorbed. He had recognised the cipher which he had himself invented; and it so fell out that the first sentence which caught his eye, as he was about to return the paper to its place in the Testament, revealed a fact so startling and ominous, that there was no choice for him but to read on and master the entire contents.

It was strange reading; and, in Sebastian’s recollection, it was always afterwards associated with the strange circumstances attendant on its perusal: the jolting waggon, the dreary drizzle, the harsh rattle of the street, and the pressure of the little coffin across his knees. It was difficult reading, too; but Sebastian finished it at last, and

then he refolded the paper with a preoccupied air. The revenge which he had put from him had come back with wings and claws! To say that his enemy was in his power, would be to understate the matter. Sebastian would have to use active energy and circumspection in order to deliver his enemy from the power of others. His forgiveness was likely to cost him more pains than his revenge would have done; for he could be revenged by simply doing nothing. Besides, why should he do anything? What right had he to stand between the law and him who had outraged it? It was a subject for heedful thought. Sebastian meditated accordingly, and the result of his meditations was made known in due season.

Late that evening Sebastian and his mother were together in the study at Cedarhurst—the same room in which they had parted the better part of a year before.

These months had produced less noticeable alteration in Mrs. Strome than in her son.

She looked a little more worn and venerable—her hands were a trifle thinner, and more transparent—the white border of her widow's cap was a shade nearer in hue to the smooth plaits of hair beneath it. Sebastian, on the other hand, seemed to have grown twelve years in twelve months ; not only were his face and carriage those of a man of forty, but his manner had lost the trenchant self-confidence and composure that formerly had marked it. In many respects he was already his mother's senior.

They had been together several hours, and the surprise, the greetings, and the explanations were over. The conversation had gradually receded from external subjects to more interior ones ; for it was never easy to be superficial in Mrs. Strome's company.

'Prout thinks I kept him from it ; but in point of fact it was the other way—it was he who preserved me !'

'I do not think it was altogether Prout.'

'At all events I had no strength of my own : I must have been a pitiable spectacle.

I could only hold on to the coffin and try to turn my mind from that thought. But it kept coming back to me like the ugly head of a snake. If I had been alone . . .'

'You can never be alone, my son.'

'I have felt alone!' said Sebastian heavily.

'So did our Lord when He was nailed to the cross. You have lost your life, dear, and saved it. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord!'

'I have lost it, but . . . Oh, mother!'

Mrs. Strome waited.

'Other men may live on the remains of goodness that were in them from the beginning; but I have none. Since I lost her, I have had only one minute's life, and that came from the thought of killing him. She was everything—and she's gone!'

'But she has gone to heaven, dear—that is, she has been given to you more entirely and sacredly. Before, you might have lost her; but you cannot lose her now, for the kingdom of heaven is within you. Her death in this world is a symbol that whatever is highest

and purest in your character has been uplifted and gifted with new life by the Lord. You have put faith in yourself until now—as if a man should believe that the only light to be depended upon was from the lamp that he himself had lighted. Your lamp was a very brilliant one, my son—that was your danger. God had to lead you through a darkness so much the greater and more terrible. But now you know the helplessness of your light, God's light will rise for you, which no man lighted.'

If Sebastian believed that his mother's testimony was true, his mind was still too much unstrung fully to respond to it. That last grim struggle of his, when he clung as it were for life to his baby's dead body, had left him with small aptitude for self-analysis. There is an hour before dawn when human vitality is at its lowest ebb. In so far as Sebastian was conscious of himself, he was conscious of pain and feebleness. He felt that his lamp was indeed extinguished ; and his soul—nay, his very flesh and bones like-

wise cried out for that divine sunrising whereof his mother had spoken. But who, by taking thought or piling up treasure, can cajole or buy that heavenly favour, without which neither treasure nor thought avail? Sebastian was sure he could not; nor could he find the least ground for assuming that he could get it without an equivalent.

‘I live too far north,’ he said. ‘The sun doesn’t rise on my latitude. I know I don’t deserve it.’

‘We don’t deserve blessings, dear, else we could not be blessed.’

Sebastian rested his forehead on his hands. Presently he said in a low voice :

‘I am afraid!’

Mrs. Strome’s face lighted up. ‘Then I have no fear!’ she said. ‘Your sun has begun to rise already; and that promise you made to me has been kept.’

Sebastian looked up, not understanding. But we seldom do understand the best part of ourselves, perhaps because there is nothing of ourselves therein.

‘Half-an-hour later, Sebastian said :

‘ I shall see Mary to-morrow, then ; what will happen after that I don’t know !’

‘ It will be shown you, when the time comes,’ answered the mother.



CHAPTER XIII.

A MORNING CALL.



NOTHING was known at Cedarhurst of what had been going on at the house in Queen's Gate. When Sebastian alighted from his hansom at the latter place, he noticed that the blinds of the upper story were drawn ; and a considerable time elapsed, after he had rung the bell, before the door was opened.

' I wish to see Mr. Fawley,' he said to the footman.

' The orders is, not at 'ome to hany one. The master have been ill.'

' Nonsense, sir ! don't you recognise me—

Sebastian Strome? Tell your mistress I am here.'

'Mr. Strome? Oh, I begs pardon, sir! I didn't recognise you at first. If you'll step in, I'll inquire, but horders is stringent.'

This hesitating reception might have struck Sebastian more, had he not been too much preoccupied with what he was going to say to Mary, to bestow thought on outside matters. For several minutes he paced up and down the room into which he had been ushered; at length the door was opened, and admitted Aunt Sophia.

She seemed distraught and worried.

'You may be able to do something with her,' were her first words to him. 'She won't let me nor any one get near him. I've been here since yesterday afternoon.'

'The footman told me Fawley was ill. Is it serious? What's the matter with him?'

'We don't know. That's the trouble. Nobody has seen him, so far as I can find out, since Sunday afternoon. He had one of his fits, I understand: Mr. Smillet was here

at the time, or soon afterwards : poor Selim was taken to the blue chamber, and he has been there ever since. Mary will explain nothing : I don't know what to make of her, she acts so oddly ! Suppose anything should happen ?—Selim's illness take a bad turn, and she there alone with him ? It's awful to think of !

‘ I should not think of pitying Fawley because she was his nurse. She must know better than any one what he needs. However, I must see one or both of them immediately. I have news for them.’

‘ Tell me what it is !’ said Aunt Sophia, with an uncontrollable expression of eagerness. ‘ Oh, you may safely confide in me. Selim did—I know all his affairs. I know they were in a critical condition. He told me——’

‘ My dear madam, I can tell you nothing. The information I carry is not my own property. I came upon it by chance, and it belongs only to Mrs. Fawley.’

At this juncture the footman reappeared,

and requested Mr. Strome to please walk this way. He followed the man up a broad flight of stairs and along a wide hall. In one corner a number of ladders, boards, and other paraphernalia of the plumbing and house-decorating trade were stowed away.

‘They was to have been at work here this week,’ observed the man, by way of apology and explanation; ‘but mistress she stopped heverything when Mr. Fawley was took ill.’

‘So our plot would have failed, after all!’ crossed Sebastian’s mind.

‘This is the room, if you please, Mr. Strome,’ said the footman, and departed, leaving him there. He entered.

It was an ante-chamber of moderate size, exquisitely upholstered in blue satin and gold. Mary was gazing out of the window when Sebastian opened the door: she turned sharply at the sound, but, on seeing him, advanced towards him at once with her free, elastic step and uplifted head. There was a patch of varying colour in each of her otherwise pale cheeks; her lips were colourless;

her eyes, under the severe auburn brows, appeared black, and absorbed rather than emitted light. Her hair, partly gathered up, and secured by a stiletto of blue steel with an inlaid golden hilt, fell from the knot in a dishevelled sparkling mass below her shoulders. She was dressed in a loose-flowing robe of blue, embroidered with gold: there was a classic flavour about the costume, rendering yet more striking the grand Junonian contour of her face and figure.

Her aspect had never been more beautiful, though a second glance discovered an omnipresent excitement or nervousness, not demonstrative, but intense. It was betrayed in the way she breathed, in the restless working of her fingers, and in a peculiar movement of the eyes and brows, recurring at intervals, as if she were nervously shunning a painful glare of light. And when she spoke, a jarring note was ever and anon audible in her voice, marring the melody of its deep music, but imparting to it a new and odd charm. It was the fascination of discord.

Sebastian looked at her with poignant interest. He perceived at once that she was not quite her right self—that her vigil and her anxiety, or whatever it was, had temporarily made her a trifle light-headed ; but at the same time he was catching a glimpse of an inner aspect of her nature—seeing directly things whose existence had heretofore been an inference merely. She spoke first.

‘I should have sent after you if you had delayed any longer. We have strange lives, Sebastian, don’t we? What a change! You look older. Do I?’

‘You look tired. How long have you been shut up here?’

‘Give me your hand—both your hands. Yes, you are real—you are flesh and blood! Oh, I have been here so long! Since I saw you last. Did you know that I reckon always from my times of seeing you? Yes, they are my years and days. But when you are with me, time stops, and is made joy! If you will stay with me, Sebastian, I’ll live for ever!’

‘She’s more than half delirious,’ thought

Sebastian. 'Telling her my business will bring her to her senses, if anything will.' Aloud he said, 'I have something important to tell you about Selim.'

There was a door at the end of the room opposite to that by which Sebastian had entered. When he pronounced the name 'Selim,' Mary moved quietly but swiftly to this door, keeping her face toward Sebastian the while, her eyes closely observing him. Arrived at the door, she put one hand behind her, turned the key in the lock, and then put it in her pocket. This done, her manner, which had become momentarily overcast and suspicious, lightened once more; and she came forward again with an arch, persuasive smile, like a child who has been naughty but wishes to be loved just the same.

'Everything troublesome is in there,' she said. 'But I've made a discovery! If you want to be free from evil in this world, the only way is to lock it up and turn your back on it. You can't kill it: and if you let it out, it will hunt you to death! But you can't kill

it ; though it's so cunning, it sometimes pretends to die !

This ambiguous talk did not lessen Sebastian's uneasiness.

'Has any doctor seen your husband ?' he asked.

'Who is my husband ?' demanded Mary, with a slow smile. 'Who has seen such a person ? Do you think he is in that room ? Well, then, don't disturb him : he's asleep.'

'Is he better ?'

'He is asleep,' she repeated, after a short pause. 'It would be cruel to awaken him. Come, let us sit down here.'

She once more took his hand and led him to a *tête-à-tête* ottoman, away from the locked door. When they were seated there, she seemed to lapse into a reverie lasting several moments ; then she looked up with a sigh and said :

'Life is clumsily arranged ! This is really the first chance we have had to sit hand in hand and tell our hearts to each other. How is your heart ? Mine is full : it would have

broken soon. But it was my fault : I should have thought before of so simple a thing as locking the door and putting the key in my pocket. Well, we are as safe now as if there had never been any evil in the world.'

Her cheek rested against the satin cushion of the ottoman ; a flickering smile was on her lips and in her changing eyes, which she kept turned upon him. Her hand was hot as a fever. Sebastian felt himself influenced powerfully by something—he knew not what—but he felt that he must not yield. Mary had never before spoken or behaved in this manner : it was not like her, and yet, from another point of view, it seemed more than like her—it seemed her only genuine self. It was sweet and potent : it was what he had wished her to be that day in the carriage. But—could she be aware what she was doing ? could she know what she was tempting him to do ? She was delirious !

'Are you happy, Sebastian, as I am ? That evil shadow was hideous, wasn't it ? but I don't care now : freedom and rest seem

the more delicious. It was worth while our being apart, to know the delight of meeting. Our happiness was not to be postponed till we got to Heaven, after all! our heaven shall be here on earth! What if it should turn out a dream, though! Are you quite sure you are real?

Half-playfully, half-anxiously she touched his forehead and hair with her soft hot fingers, and lightly caressed his cheek.

‘Oh, yes!’ she sighed; ‘but how thin, poor boy, and how old! But no wonder! Isn’t it strange how real sad fancies seem? Sometimes I catch myself saying, “When I was married,” as if I really had been married! Imagine me married, Sebastian, to any one but you! I must laugh a little at that. Then I fancied you had a baby, a lovely little girl, named after me—I stood god-mother to it. You would think me crazy if I told you all my dreams. You have no baby, have you?’

‘No.’

‘No: it’s shut in an inner room, and the

door locked—eh, Sebastian ? Sin and sorrow and death are shadows : they pass away, and the sun of love shines for ever. But there is always one dread—a fearful dread it is ! What if the door should get unlocked, or drop off its hinges ? or what if the window—Hark ! I am always fancying I hear something ! Let me try !

She moved softly to the locked door, laid her ear against it for a moment or two, and then stealthily tried the lock to see whether it were secure. Having satisfied herself on this point, she came back to Sebastian on the ottoman, with the same flickering and somewhat mysterious smile.

Had mental unsoundness been a contagious affection, Sebastian would fain have caught it from Mary, and have asserted with her that all sin and sorrow were a dream, and that he and she were an untried youth and maiden who, after a night of gloomy visions, were met to renew their love and vows. Fantastic though was the idea, yet, if viewed from the spiritual standpoint, there was a soul

of verity in it more true than the material fact. By simply regarding Selim and all appertaining to him as a nonentity—a negative quantity,—Mary gave positive and present existence to her former relations with Sebastian; gained the right, as she put it, to sit hand in hand with him and tell him her heart. The right was founded on a delusion, but it was a delusion that withdrew the veil which had intervened hitherto between her love and her acknowledgment of it—the veil, namely, of conventional propriety—the self-same veil which Sebastian had been so urgent to remove during their interview in the carriage. All that she had indignantly refused then—she sweetly surrendered to him now: and yet, such was the irony of fate, that unless Sebastian could share her hallucination, he could not (save by taking dishonourable advantage of it) respond to her advances. Though they sat side by side in mutual contact, yet all that was symbolised by that locked door was between them still. Everything which, at this moment, was

awake and self-conscious in Mary, was Sebastian's and his only—she had said it : but he must nevertheless respect in her that which had become dormant, and which, dormant or not, barred his way to the rest.

Although Sebastian perceived this obligation with perfect distinctness, it would be too much to assert that he might not, in ordinary circumstances, have found the temptation to disregard it too powerful to resist. Mary was a Circe if she chose to be one. But Sebastian was strangely helped and reinforced at this juncture by something which he had until now regarded as anything but a source of power : by the exceeding tenderness of sorrow, namely, which the loss of his baby had wrought in his soul. This grief had a certain sanctity in it, which acted as a charm against unlawful passion. And thus it happened that for the second time the influence of a little being, whose innocent life had not lasted long enough for it to be aware that it was human and mortal, had come between these two for their good.

Therefore Sebastian, instead of taking Mary in his arms and kissing her, deliberately assumed a business-like air, disengaged his hand from hers, and, taking a bundle of papers from his pocket, prepared to fix his attention on the object of his visit. The surest way to arouse Mary from her visionary and fanciful state, he thought, would be doggedly to ply her with disagreeable facts, and the facts he had at disposal were disagreeable enough in all conscience !



CHAPTER XIV.

SELIM'S ESCAPE.

‘**W**AS Selim let you know anything about his affairs?’ he began.

A shade of displeasure and obstinacy crept into Mary’s eyes, and she turned away from him petulantly, and said in a sullen tone :

‘Why do you wish to spoil my play?’

But the next moment she turned again, and leaning close to him, murmured against his cheek :

‘Do not be unkind!—you of all men, Sebastian!’

That tone penetrated him through all.

He held his breath and the blood leapt to his face. Mary watched him.

‘You were only making believe to be unkind,’ she continued, endeavouring to make him look at her. ‘You would not grudge me a little happiness!’

Sebastian clenched his teeth, and got up from beside her : he walked to the window, and stood there a few moments looking out ; then he faced her again, so that his countenance was in shadow. She reclined on the ottoman in superb and careless grace, meeting and absorbing his glance.

‘You and Selim are in great danger,’ he said, in a harsh tone. ‘I came here to warn you of it. He has put himself in the power of the law : he not only owes money that he can’t pay, but he has taken criminal means to reimburse himself at his creditors’ expense ; and he has done it so recklessly that they have——’

Mary laughed with the most natural, contagious air in the world. She had been bringing the tips of her fingers together, one

after the other, and then separating them in reverse order while Sebastian was speaking. After her laugh was over, she stretched out her arms in front of her and yawned like an indolent tigress.

‘How much in earnest you seem!’ she said. ‘Ah, Sebastian, you are wasting time! Can you think of nothing better to do than to stand there and scold about creditors,—Sebastian?’

The intonation she gave to his name was as dangerous as poison. He shifted his feet, and his lips moved, but gave out nothing audible.

‘Let the unjust be unjust still. Why should you and I trouble ourselves about them?’ Mary continued. ‘Come! I have never been loved as I wish—but you can love, can you not? And—listen! No one has ever known how I can love: but you shall know!’

‘Mary—Mrs. Fawley, you don’t know what you are saying: you are not yourself!’

If you will not answer me, I must speak to your husband.'

'I am here : speak to me ! But not in that hard tone, nor with that unkind look ! Why are you so cross ? Am I ugly or disagreeable ? Am I, Sebastian ? Look at me !'

Sebastian groaned. It did seem cruel that this noble loveliness and beauty, which he had coveted so desperately, should offer itself to him only when it had become, so to speak, a phantom, and unattainable. However, he nerved himself again and said :

'Where is your husband ? Is he in that room ?'

He made a gesture towards the locked door as he spoke. But instantly, with a swift, sinuous movement, Mary left her seat and interposed herself between him and the door, against which she set her back. She looked defiant ; but underneath the defiance was manifest enough a willingness to be appeased and loving again, if she were allowed to have her way.

‘You must not go there!’ she said, whispering.

‘Go yourself, then, and rouse him! He has no time to lose: if he is not actually at death’s door, he must be off to-day.’

‘At death’s door! Well, let it stay locked then!’

‘What?’

‘Death’s door!’

‘Mary, do for God’s sake come to your right senses!’ exclaimed Sebastian, pale and grim. ‘If you will listen to me, and answer rationally, something may be done. Let me read you this memorandum, written in cipher, and tell me if, so far as you know, it is correct. You used to understand business: I suppose you know how the estate was settled. Is the landed property absolutely yours?’

‘I see how it is!’ said Mary suddenly, with a lowering of her brows. ‘You wish to entrap me: you have some plot—some secret! Very well—I have a secret of my

own! Do you keep yours, and I'll keep mine. Mine is the greatest!

Sebastian pressed his heel against the floor, and breathed hard. 'Heaven knows,' he broke out, 'I have little enough cause to spare your husband any suffering! He has been the curse of my life from the beginning; and the last thing he did was to cause the death of my little baby—an hour after you stood godmother to it. I have come here from its grave—with this paper, which is enough to put Fawley in gaol, even if there were no other evidence against him.'

'He is safe: you cannot hurt him!' said Mary, with a return of her mysterious smile. 'Let him rest: forget him! He wronged me too, but I forget him.'

'You will have reason to remember him, I fear,' returned Sebastian, who was now thoroughly aroused. 'He is not safe—you are mistaken there! And my object is not to harm him, but to save him as much as possible from harm. For he is your hus-

band, whatever else he may be ; and—I bear him no malice !’

‘It is best to forget him,’ said Mary, shaking her head musingly. ‘You would, if you knew my secret. I am tired : if you are here only on business, leave me, and come some other time. I would rather be alone than with a man of business !’

‘Answer me one thing, and I will leave you. The only chance of saving Fawley from prosecution and exposure is to pay his debts. You might perhaps pay them by mortgaging all your landed property. Are you willing to do it, or do you prefer that he should save himself by fraud or flight ? That is my question !’

‘It is a foolish question. Have not I said that he is safe ?’

‘You can’t say it now.’

Mary sauntered forward, with her hands behind her, until she was so close to Sebastian that her loose robe touched him. He was not much taller than she ; she looked up in his eyes with a strange, wistful expression—

it made him feel, for the first time, an anxiety distinct from and more interior than the anxiety that had nerved him thus far. After a breath or two, Mary said, or rather murmured, 'He has paid his debt.'

'You have paid it, you mean?'

She became very white, and answered tremulously, 'You have no right to say that! We are not responsible for what we only meant to do.'

'Well,' said Sebastian, perplexed, but coming to the main point, 'however it was done, the debts are paid?'

Mary seemed to assent: but she was becoming more and more agitated.

'When was it done?' pursued he, thinking rapidly.

'Long ago! Last Sunday.' She pressed her clenched hands together. 'Oh, God! I have been alone ever since.'

'Alone with him?'

'Alone!—alone!'

An idea flashed upon him. 'Has Selim escaped?'

'You are playing with me! — that's dangerous!' she exclaimed with sudden wrath.

Sebastian was utterly at fault.

'If he has gone, why did you say he was ill in that room?' was his next venture. 'Why did you lock the door? Did you think I'd betray him? That's absurd! But what—why should he escape if he has paid his debts? Mary, if you are trying to shield him—if he is hiding here, and—it won't do! I say it as your friend—you could not have a truer friend than I am! Trust in me, and let him trust me. Whatever you decide, I am here to help you do it.'

'You have as much pity as most friends!' she said bitterly. 'If you knew what love was—or pain—you would have let me dream a little. When people used to fall asleep from pain, on the rack, they let them sleep, didn't they?'

She pressed her hands over her eyes, then let them drag past her temples. Her dream, or delirium, or voluntary self-hallucination, if

it were that—was passing away. She began to turn her head first one way and then another, as if taking fresh note of her surroundings. A new expression was gaining dominion in her face—of profound disquiet and suffering, but it was a loftier expression than the last. It was a touching spectacle—this metamorphosis. Under the influence of some appalling or intolerable event, Mary had temporarily subsided to a lower level of her nature: a level wherein only the natural instincts and impulses held sway, and those high and noble traits which education and experience had developed, ceased to operate. But this degenerate process had now been (by Sebastian's means) forcibly arrested and reversed, and Mary was once more rising to the height of her better self. It was a recovery as painful to the spirit as that from drowning is to the body. Her attention gradually concentrated itself upon Sebastian; she eyed him hard and seriously. There was no longer in her manner any trace of the winning and inviting humour which had just

now pervaded it ; she seemed, by comparison, reserved and stern.

‘I am trying to make this out,’ she said at length. ‘Smillet has gone, of course?’

‘According to Aunt Sophia, he hasn’t been here since Sunday.’

‘Sunday? Sunday is—some time ago, of course? I have been imagining a great many things : I have lost count, somehow. But I remember the main thing.’ She stopped as if exhausted, and being near the ottoman, she sat down.

‘I have been talking to you a good while,’ she presently resumed, as Sebastian stood silent. She did not give the words an interrogative intonation, but she evidently wished to be confirmed on the subject.

‘Not long,’ he replied. ‘You were a little confused at first, from worry and loss of rest. I came about your husband.’

‘You have heard then?’ she said quickly, visibly wincing. ‘I suppose the bare fact must be known, if it’s so long ago as you say.

. . . But nobody can know that I—unless—
have I been very delirious? Have I talked,
I mean, or——’

‘So far as I know, you have been unnecessarily reticent.’

Mary gave him a searching look, which he met quietly. She seemed relieved. But the next moment she asked anxiously :

‘Did you say Aunt Sophia was here? What is she doing? Has she been taking charge of . . . Oh, I must go—that is my place! Where is it?’ She rose with a frightened look.

‘Aunt Sophia was doing nothing except ask about you and Selim, when I saw her. She said she thought you were wrong to allow no one to see him.’

‘Allow no one to see him?’ she repeated, with a halting utterance. ‘How can that be? I don’t even know where they have put him—at least,’ she added in an inward tone, scrutinising Sebastian’s face apprehensively, ‘do I know?’

‘I understood that he was in that room,’

replied he, nodding towards the locked door. 'But I think now that I was mistaken. Probably he is not here at all—not in London, I mean. It was to his interest to leave, and I suppose he has left.'

This, in reality, was the conclusion at which Sebastian had finally arrived. His theory was something as follows: there had been a violent scene between Mary and Selim, in which the latter had acquainted her with his ruin and dishonour, and had perhaps demanded her company in his flight. She had refused, but had agreed to conceal as long as possible the fact of his escape. Being then left alone, with this secret preying upon her mind, her brain had become partially affected. Such was his roughly-formed interpretation of the case; and it was not lacking in plausibility.

'Unless I have been quite mad from the first, what you think is impossible,' said Mary, composing herself by a resolute effort. 'I have got bewildered between what may really have happened, and what I may only

have fancied : but unless I am quite mad, I know that Selim has not escaped, in the sense you mean.'

She stopped, evidently searching her memory. Sebastian awaited the result in a frame of mind inexplicable to himself. How, in a rational creation, could a creature like Selim Fawley be permitted to bring to such a pass as this a woman like Mary? Did he care what might become of Selim? On his own account, not a jot! but, on Mary's—entering by sympathy into her position respecting the matter—he cared with all his soul, and would have given his life to see Fawley an honourable and honoured man. But oh, how powerless he was to help her! And how his heart ached for her!

'In that room, did you say?' she asked at length, in a dry, unmodulated tone.

'You locked the door just now : you have the key.'

They exchanged a glance ; feeling, perhaps, the gathering chill of a near crisis. While Mary was hunting in her pocket for

the key, she tottered a little : Sebastian put out his arm to support her. She leaned with one hand upon his shoulder ; and in this way they came up to the door, and Mary put the key into the lock.

‘I don’t know what it will be,’ she said faintly. ‘But don’t think the worst of me ! I know the sin was in my will, but God did not let me do it.’

‘Come, there will be nothing so terrible !’ said Sebastian, with a show of confidence he did not feel.

She unlocked the door, and they went in together.


It was not terrible. The room—a bed-chamber—was in perfect order. On a table near the window was a vase of flowers. Flowers also lay upon the breast and around the head of the body which was laid out, straight and motionless, upon the bed. The eyelids were closed : the hair was carefully smoothed and arranged : the expression of the face was untroubled. The hands, white

and waxen, lay outside the coverlet. Selim had escaped : but he had left behind him an image of composure more serene than he had ever shown in this world.



CHAPTER XV.

A GAME OF CONSEQUENCES.

 HE unexpected death of Selim Fawley, Esq., whose life had been so full of promise, made a sensation in London; nor was the sensation diminished by the discovery (which was not long in being made) that the promise had been materially less than the performance. A certain amount of obscurity hung over the details of the affair; and this was so far useful, that it admitted a wider range of speculation and discussion thereon than would have been possible had everything been definitely known. Society was placed under

the obligation of having something provided for it to talk about, on which every speaker might hold a different opinion. Imaginations which had shrivelled for lack of employment, now expanded and waxed fat ; the tongue of scandal wagged grandiloquent ; and all the tribe of the prophets of the *fait accompli* uttered with unanimous voice their venerable shibboleth, 'What did I tell you !' Considering that the event took place somewhat in advance of the season, it was an undeniable success.

The Mulberries were for the most part out of town ; and those who remained probably felt themselves burdened by so much the weightier a responsibility. It devolved upon half a dozen to do the work of thirty ; the reputation of the Club must be maintained ; and the devoted handful braced themselves actively to their work. The result was creditable. After all, when it comes to devising and confirming a perverted version of any given occurrence, six determined persons are as good as a population.

‘Ashe, bring me one of my cigars,’ said Culver, one afternoon, ‘and brandy!’

‘As much brandy as will go into his head, Ashe,’ put in Ephraim Arch, ‘and as much water as would float him.’

‘I wish it may drown you!’ retorted Culver; and then looked triumphantly around and laughed harshly, under the impression that he had said something clever and crushing.

‘It would be easier to drown you than to float you, and more useful,’ was Ephraim’s rejoinder. ‘I would be unobtrusive, Culver, if I were you. Ever since you lost your voice, you have existed only on sufferance; some day somebody will pick you up, mistaking you for one of your own bad cigars, and throw you behind the fire, or out of window.’

Any allusion to his loss of voice (a calamity which had befallen him during the past summer) generally silenced Culver for a while; but his cigars were still a feature of

his character which he felt stamina enough to stand up for ; and he said sulkily :

‘ The only man capable of appreciating my cigars was that American that Grannit brought here the other day. He knew good tobacco when he saw it.’

‘ Grannit’s American was not in a mood to be critical on that day,’ observed the Reporter.

‘ Don’t you recollect it was just before the news came out that that fellow Fawley had killed himself ? Fawley owed him about half a million, and he must have suspected the way things were going long before.’

‘ Is that Selim Fawley ?’ inquired a handsome young fellow, St. John Dennis by name, who had just returned from a diplomatic excursion to Vienna. It was he who had met Sebastian in the street and invited him to dine at Greenwich nine months ago.

‘ It was Selim Fawley, but he didn’t kill himself,’ said Culver. ‘ He died very suddenly when alone with his wife one day. Rather suspicious ! Mrs. Fawley was a very muscular woman, and had the devil of a

temper, as all red-haired women have. She hated her husband, and they had lived like cat and dog ever since they were married. Mrs. Fawley had been heard to threaten that she'd do away with him times and again. She killed a mad bull once, when she was a mere child, single-handed. The supposition is that she came upon him when he was asleep after dinner, and strangled him to death. The verdict at the inquest brought it in death by apoplexy, of course! You see, Mrs. Fawley had influential friends. But everybody knows how it really was.'

'You are quite sure about the correctness of your facts?' said St. John Dennis, fixing his keen blue eyes on Culver.

'Oh, let him go on! He's sure about everything—except his *do, re, mi, fa!*' interposed Arch, grinning.

'By Jove, though, this is interesting!' said the Reporter. 'What caused the disagreement between Mr. and Mrs. Fawley?'

'What caused it? The old story, of course—jealousy! Fawley was a black-

guard, of course, but his wife was a regular Lucrezia Borgia ! There was a lover in the case—that's the truth of the matter.'

'A lover ! Who was he ?'

'You know him—everybody knew him ; though for my part I never could understand why such a fellow was received anywhere, least of all in a club like ours. He gave himself out to be studying for the ministry ; but heaven save the ministry, I say, if such men are to go into it. He was a swindling gambler, that's what he was ! he swindled me out of near a thousand pounds at cards one night. I knew what he was from the first ; but of course nobody would believe what I told them until they found out for themselves. He got kicked out of society at last, and lived down in Whitechapel, and was a sort of leader among the thieves and murderers there, I've heard ; and was married to some woman he picked up there ; but she got killed off very conveniently in a street row. Well, this was the fellow that Mrs. Fawley was in love with.'

‘But you haven’t told us his name?’

‘I should think the description would tell that. Sebastian Strome is the man I mean. I wish I knew where he was now.’

St. John made a movement as if to speak, but restrained himself for the present. The Reporter said :

‘I used to think Strome rather a nice fellow. So he was at the bottom of it, was he? And he and Mrs. Fawley have gone off together, I suppose?’

‘Well, they haven’t yet; but it’s only a fortnight ago that Fawley had that unfortunate stroke of apoplexy; it wouldn’t be quite safe for them to show their cards yet. All in good time! Mrs. Fawley is living quietly at home with her mother.’

‘Who has been dead about twenty years,’ remarked Arch, winking at the Reporter.

‘Well, her aunt, then. I don’t pretend to have the Court Guide by heart, as Mr. Ephraim Arch has. My opinion is, the less one knows about such a disreputable business the better.’

‘So I should judge, from the way you tell the story,’ said Arch. ‘You are graphic and fluent ; but there isn’t a word of truth in your version from beginning to end.’

The Reporter giggled.

‘Perhaps you can correct me!’ snarled Culver.

‘Upon the whole, I consider that your abuse of Strome will do him more good than my vindication of him ; so I’ll hold my tongue.’

St. John Dennis smiled and said :

‘Quite right, Mr. Arch.’

‘But how about the debts ? How were they settled ?’ demanded the conscientious reporter, clasping his hands over his knee and bending forward.

At this Arch began to chuckle.

‘It would make a lovely comedy,’ he said. ‘The most fetching character in the piece is old David Fawley, Selim’s governor. I dare say you may have met the old gentleman, Mr. Dennis. He’s a Hebrew ; but not exactly a Nazarene. He had been working

for years to get Selim married to Miss Dene, who had a lot of property. That was the condition on which Selim was to be taken into the bank. Well, by hook and by crook—a good deal of both, I fancy!—Selim married her; and not only that, but he made ten or twenty thousand pounds out of a war-supply speculation, in combination with that American of Grannit's. This gratified the patriarchal David immensely, and he kotowed to Master Selim as if the young man were a Midas. He bowed him into the bank parlour, and begged him to do him the honour to consider himself a partner immediately. Master Selim graciously consents; puts in his share of capital, and sets to work on his own hook. All seems to go on well; and nobody suspects Master Selim's genius for speculation. I fancy the bang he got on his cocoa-nut last spring may have had something to do with it; for, to do him justice, he used to be tolerably careful of his money when he was an ordinary human being like us. However, the crash comes at last, and it turns out

that the young Midas has not only let in Grannit and his American friend for a good round sum, but is some hundreds of thousands in debt to the bank as well. He had arranged to abscond with a very tolerable fortune besides. The patriarch is one of the first to hear the news, and his parental pride is changed into mourning and wrath. He rends his garments, gets out a warrant, and presents himself with it at Midas' mansion in Queen's Gate early in the morning. Alas! he meets Midas in a handsome suit of rose-wood and brass handles coming down the front steps. Tableau. Curtain. Lovely comedy! It only needs writing. The situations are ready-made. I must get Grannit to do it for me.'

'By Jove!' murmured the Reporter reflectively. 'But how happened David to hear of his son's defalcation before he heard of his death?'

'No one knew of his death until some days after it occurred, except Mrs. Fawley: and by the way, Mr. Dennis, without pre-

judice to the lady, wasn't it rather rash in her, to say the least of it, to be alone for two or three days with a dead body in the house?'

'It is a sad story,' replied St. John, gravely. 'The manner of her husband's death appears to have so shocked her as to render her to some extent delirious.'

'Fawley had treated her badly, hadn't he?' inquired the Reporter.

'You may take long odds on that!' said Arch, nodding significantly. 'Fawley was a fellow who had no business to marry at all, and whatever woman married him would be disgracefully taken in. I know that much, and I have reason to think Strome knew it too. If I'd been in his shoes, I'd have forbid the banns—he could have done it!'

'Is that a fact?' queried the Reporter curiously. 'How could that be?'

'My opinion is, since Fawley is dead, it would be wronging those who are alive to say anything upon that subject,' remarked St. John with emphasis.

'My sentiments also!' said Arch, emptying

his glass of whisky and water and setting it down gently. 'Ashe, poke up this fire!'

'So the debts weren't paid?' pursued the Reporter.

'Not in my comedy, at all events!' replied Arch, chuckling.

'In reality, though, I have reason to believe they were,' remarked the young diplomatist. 'Mrs. Fawley paid them by the sacrifice of her estate. She is now living on some two or three hundred a year, instead of the fifteen thousand she had before her marriage. In a few weeks as soon as she has recovered her health sufficiently, she is going to take the directorship of a charitable home which she built and endowed last year. She has been very ill, and is so still. You may depend on this information, Mr. Culver, and gentlemen; I had it from a trustworthy source. Mr. Culver, I am constrained to tell you that your insinuations regarding this lady are false. They are also cowardly. And, by-the-way, you just now expressed a wish to know where Sebastian Strome is.

He is in London at this moment, and I have no doubt he will be glad to see you, and to answer what you have said about him, if you will take the trouble to call upon him during the next three days. After that he goes East on an important mission for the Government. I have the honour of being his colleague. Lord Welshford is our chief. Here is my card, Mr. Culver, with my address written on it. If you should think it worth your while to look me up, perhaps I might find other items of news that would interest you. At present, I must beg permission to take my leave. Good-afternoon, gentlemen! And with a superb bow, the fiery young Irishman walked out.

‘By my halidame!’ exclaimed Arch, grandiloquently, ‘an’ that be not a deadly challenge to thee, Culver, I wist not what is! After him, man, and bathe thy arms shoulder-deep in his blood! Don’t hesitate from fear lest his blood is not as blue as yours. He is the descendant of a line of Irish kings; moreover, he is a practised duellist, and has more

than once pinked and winged his man on the Continent. After him! away! He will escape thee else!

‘You are very facetious!’ said Culver, sourly. ‘All I have to say is, if gentlemen are to be exposed to insult in this way at their own club, the sooner they are out of it the better. How that foul-mouthed little Paddy contrived to force his way in here is more than I can imagine. I shall call a meeting of the committee on the subject.’

‘Better get some one else to call for you: that poor cracked voice of yours will never win their ears,’ suggested Arch benevolently.

‘I fancy you were wrong about Strome—eh, Culver?’ observed the Reporter, stroking his short whisker. ‘I said so at the time, you know. Not likely a fellow such as you described him would be chosen by Lord Welshford as his private secretary—is it? Not very good form, either, to pitch into a fellow like that when his back’s turned. That’s an awfully good post that Strome’s got, you know. I’d apologise to him if I

were you. I shall go over and call on him to-morrow, I think, and ask him about Lord Welshford's mission. Strome is some relation of Lord Welshford, you know.'

Culver shrugged his shoulders misanthropically; Arch musingly cocked his eyebrow. The afternoon waned; and for a little time before Ashe lit the lamps, the Mulberry Club and its occupants were buried in obscurity.

* * * * *

St. John Dennis, after leaving the club, walked to his rooms off Piccadilly, and entered the apartment at the back which was fitted up as a study. On the sofa was seated a gentleman reading an evening paper. He looked up as St. John entered, and said:

'The thing has come.'

'Glad to hear it! Let's have a look at it.'

It was a document, signed 'Victoria R.,' and declaring that her Majesty was pleased to appoint her trusty and well-beloved Sebastian Strome to a certain not undesirable diplomatic post.

‘Good!’ said St. John, having glanced through it. ‘And my news is that Welshford says we’re to start day after to-morrow, which is Monday. So you’d better run down to Cedarhurst to-night.’

When Sebastian was ready to go, St. John put his hand on his shoulder, and said :

‘I wish you’d see whether that gap in the evidence about Mrs. Fawley can’t be bridged over. Was no one there besides herself at her husband’s death? I came near thrashing a blackguard in the club to-day. Can nothing be done?’

‘I hope something can : and so I’m going with you to the Crimea.’

‘Hullo!’

‘Yes; you and Lord Welshford are my cat’s-paw. I don’t know how I should have managed without you. I’m going there to find Smillet.’

‘Oh, he’s the *deus ex machinâ*, is he?’

‘If anybody is.’

‘Humph! I hope you’ll find him!’

‘I shall, if he’s alive.’


‘I hope he’s alive!’

‘He is too valuable to die,’ said Sebastian.



CHAPTER XVI.

SMILLET IS WANTED.

‘ELL, mother, it's settled! I start on Monday.’

‘So soon, Sebastian? Well, I will be glad, if you are,’ the mother answered, with a smile and a sigh.

‘The sooner the better, you see, since the mystery will be the sooner explained. Not that there is any to my mind, but it must be cleared up. St. John was speaking of it to-day—the way fools were talking. Mary will hear an echo of it sooner or later, if she has not already.’

‘I can understand why Mary should feel

as she does. Everything went wrong at once. She had been cruelly treated for so long that at last she was hardly sane. She says she threatened him in that last terrible interview; and when he was suddenly stricken down before her in that way, she could hardly be sure that she was not actually guilty of his death. And then her mind gave way almost entirely for a time—that seems evident.’

‘There is no doubt that Smillet must have come in just before or after; the question is, which? Well, I shall know when I see him. If he saw Fawley dead, and Mary out of her mind, I cannot understand his having left England in that way, without a word of explanation. That is the only mystery about the affair to me.’

‘Did you say you had seen Mrs. Sophia Fawley?’

‘There is nothing to be learnt from her, even if she knew anything about it. It is pitiable to see the poor woman. She used to be very particular about her dress and her

pose, and thought a good deal of her handsome instep ; she was coquettish, in fact, and certainly very clever. When I saw her yesterday, she was lying on her sofa in her lodgings. She was so drugged with morphia, or some such thing, that she seems hardly in her right mind. She talked of nothing but her injuries and her dislikes ; she hadn't a good word for anybody—not even for Selim. And yet she showed plainly enough that she loved Selim with all the heart there was in her. She rambled on about the plans she had arranged with him to go to America with their plunder ; and then about how he had abused her and been ungrateful. All her grace and good humour are gone. I tried to make her tell me whether she wanted anything done for her : but she wants everything, and nothing in particular. It is hard to make people happy who have cared only about themselves, because you can't give them more of themselves than they have already. She enjoys complaining of neglect more than she would enjoy receiving any

help. It's a pity! She was a very talented woman, and might have made a figure almost anywhere. She spoke only once of Mary, and then she said she would never believe that she did not kill Selim. I heard her say as much to Mary herself when she came into the Blue chamber where we were standing beside the body, that Tuesday morning; and since Mary could not clearly account for her own actions during Sunday night and Monday, she didn't know how to defend herself. Oh, Smillet! Why couldn't you have stayed another week? Heaven grant, when I find him, he may be able to fill up the gap in Mary's memory! She could not bear to live in uncertainty about it.'

'I think better of Mary than that,' said Mrs. Strome. 'I have never known a stronger nature than hers: so passionate and straightforward, and so impressionable. She is capable of being the noblest of saints; but also of being profoundly wicked. Such natures never outlive the danger of falling under temptation, as weaker natures

outlive it. Perhaps the Lord may see the necessity of providing her with some such terribly powerful reminder to control herself as that would be—I mean the shadow of doubt whether her passion may not once have carried her too far. And if He does, I am sure she will accept it with humility. Ah, my dear son !

‘What, mother ?’

But Mrs. Strome did not explain herself. During the pause that ensued, Sebastian fancied that he divined the thought or the wish that remained unuttered. He looked at her, and she put forth her tremulous slender hand, and his met it. But neither did he open his mouth to speak.

After a while she said :

‘I liked Mr. St. John Dennis. He has a pleasant face.’

‘He’s a fine fellow. It was great good luck my meeting him. Otherwise, I might never have been able to get to the East at all. I should never have thought of applying to Lord Welshford. But Dennis said at once

that I was the man his lordship wanted for the place, and that I must make up my mind to go. You may be sure I didn't make many difficulties. As nearly as can be judged, I shall be taken precisely to the place where I shall be most likely to find Smillet: and have a salary paid me into the bargain!' he added, smiling.

'Of what regiment is Mr. Smillet the chaplain?'

'Of none in particular. The fellow's heart is too big to hold anything less than a whole army, apparently. It will be funny to see him there—to observe his conduct under fire! And the braver he is (and he's certain to be ridiculously brave) the funnier it will be. Oh, well; I wish I could be funny in the same way. His power lies in his faculty of self-obliteration: in the earnestness of his purpose he so utterly forgets his own personality, that what remains is pure force: and everybody and thing must yield to him.'

'You do not expect to be much under fire,

my son? Your duties won't take you into the field?' said Mrs. Strome, faintly.

'Not my diplomatic duties, perhaps: but my other duty will: the place to look for Smillet will be among the bullets, unless I'm much mistaken.' Sebastian said this in a laughing, indifferent way, but he could not altogether suppress the undertone of deeper exultation with which he, in common with numberless civilised gentlemen before and since, have contemplated the prospect of looking death in the face on the battle-field. Such a feeling has nothing to do with hatred of the enemy: any enemy will do, if he be dangerous enough: it is the instinctive longing of a vehement and thirsty spirit to be where the voice and the arm and the ardour of the blood are free. Such fiery moments compensate for many a year of slow-pulsed self-repression. Sebastian had no wish to kill any Russians; but he wished to enjoy the chance of being killed. The nearer he came to being killed, the better, he thought, should he be able to endure life afterwards; and

possibly he carried this idea to the point of absolute paradox. Only let him accomplish what he went forth to do—only let him hear from Smillet the explanation that would put Mary's grisly shadow to flight—and what matter what happened then?

But he did not tell this to his mother: he talked on with more than his usual animation; it was their last day but one together, and he would not let the memory of it in her mind be a gloomy one. He told her how Prout had enlisted and was by this time on his way to Sebastopol; he spoke cheerfully of his own brilliant prospects as a diplomatist; he recalled some passages of his life in Spitalfields, and made them amusing. It was late when they parted for the night: after she had kissed him, she kept her hands upon his shoulders for a moment, looking up in his face.

'Let us say good-bye now, dear,' she said. 'I may not feel so strong for it to-morrow.'

'Good-bye then, mother. It won't be for many months—perhaps only for a few.'

'A mother hears the voice more than

the words. I know what you have been thinking, Sebastian. I do not speak for my own selfish sake, I hope : I am an old woman, and ought to know how to behave. If God sees best to take you from me before I go—I suppose I can bear it. Only, remember what our Lord said to the Tempter when He stood on the pinnacle of the temple. Be brave enough not wilfully to cast yourself down, my son. You will not be sorry, in the end. I do not say that there will be a reward for you in this world ; God loves you better than I know how to do. But do not impatiently prevent His mercy from coming to you. It is infinite—it is more than you can ask. He will make you happy in this life if earthly happiness be safe for you. But no happiness can be real that does not involve another's.'

'I'll come back to you, if my own will can bring me back,' he answered, with a hardly perceptible sigh. 'But as to the happiness—there are some things I cannot trust myself to hope for!'

They said good-bye again, and then good-night.

The following day, Sunday, Sebastian went with his mother to call on Mary Fawley. She was living in a small house about a mile from Cedarhurst, on the borders of the great park that had been hers a month ago. She had on the same black dress that she had worn at the baptism of Sebastian's baby. She received Sebastian with remarkable cheerfulness of manner. There was a pot of white double geraniums on the table, which excited Sebastian's admiration. As she was bending one of the clusters of blossoms towards him, to give him a better view of it, it came off in her fingers, which trembled a little: and she held it and kept touching it absently to her lips during the remainder of the Strome's visit. She conversed readily about Sebastian's mission, and about her own prospective labours at the Home. 'I dare say I shall be able to do more good than if I were still mistress of Dene Hall,' she said.

No subject was touched upon that might not have been discussed between formal acquaintances. Mary was not feeling very well, but she expected to be better shortly. She trusted Sebastian would enjoy himself, and come back a full-fledged diplomatist. He anticipated meeting Smillet? Please remember her to him. She supposed that while Sebastian was away he would occasionally write to his mother? Well, she expected to see Mrs. Strome often, and so would hear the news about him. Must they really go now? Well, good-bye until the next meeting! It looks as if there might be rain to-morrow—a storm from the east. Good-bye!

So they parted: but as they were walking home, Sebastian in rather a gloomy frame of mind, all at once his mother held up before him a sprig of white geranium.

‘Where did you get that?’ he exclaimed, his eyes brightening.

‘Mary put it in my hand,’ Mrs. Strome

answered with a smile ; ‘ but I think perhaps she did not mean me to keep it ! ’

On Monday Sebastian, in company with St. John Dennis, presented himself before Lord Welshford ; and the three, with their suite, embarked on board a private steamer, and steered for the Mediterranean.

With purely historical events this story has nothing to do. Its aim has been to tell of the birth and first infancy of a man’s heart, and of sundry vicissitudes befalling other hearts in consequence thereof. Therefore, the tale of the siege of Sebastopol, and of the various diplomatic successes or failures connected with it, will not appear in these pages.

Sebastian saw very little of the siege—by no means so much as he desired : he saw quite as much as he desired of the diplomacy : but of Smillet he heard or saw nothing whatever. He was not so much master of his own movements as he had hoped to be : Lord Welshford had come to place great dependence on him, and kept him at work. In

this manner several months slipped away, and Sebastian seemed no nearer the true object of his expedition than when he started.

One bitterly cold day, however, he found himself riding through the allied camps, with a score of hours of spare time on his hands. He went forward and inspected some of the trenches. Here he met an officer who had been a friend of his in London. From him he learnt that there was to be a small reconnaissance made that night in the direction of the fortress. It was then already twilight. There was very little firing going on: a shell exploded near Sebastian and threw some dirt over him.

‘Would you mind my going with you to-night?’ he said to the officer.

‘Well, you may go, if you’ll keep quiet and not get killed—and not tell Welshford! Of course I should say no, if there was likely to be a scrimmage.’

About ten o’clock the party set out. It was pitch dark, dirty and dismal; but there

was a feeling of suppressed excitement in the business which more than counteracted these drawbacks in Sebastian's mind. They moved slowly, and with what seemed to him superfluous precaution. The party consisted of about ten men. By the time an hour had been passed in crawling stealthily along in no apparent direction, Sebastian began to wish that some new phase of the affair would open. At this juncture he felt himself touched on the shoulder, and turning, discerned an arm and hand pointing. He followed the direction of the hand with his eye, and fancied he saw, through the darkness, a level of blacker darkness; and moving along the top of this level, a small pyramidal object. This object was the upper half of a Russian soldier on sentry-duty; he was not more than twenty yards distant from them. Sebastian felt a sort of amplification of the sensation he had experienced as a boy, upon unexpectedly hooking a big trout in Cedarhurst brook.

Just at this moment a strangling, splutter-

ing sound accomplished itself close behind Sebastian : one of the men had tried to suppress a sneeze. The next moment there was a flash out of the darkness, and a burning anguish, accompanied by a violent shock, and succeeded by numbness, in Sebastian's shoulder. Immediately afterwards the whole night seemed to become alive with fire and noise. Rather confused, and at the same time curiously indifferent to all this uproar, Sebastian, who had fallen, felt himself picked up by a pair of strong arms, and carried along. Whether the arms were Russian or English he knew not, nor did he much care ; he was very thirsty, and as faint as . . .

He fainted before the proper simile occurred to him.

When he came to himself, it was daylight, and warmer, and he was in his own quarters, and it appeared to him quite natural that Smillet's round face should be the first object that met his eyes. He lost no time in intro-

ducing the topic which he had come from England to discuss.

‘Hullo, Smillet,’ he murmured, ‘since you’re here at last, tell me whether you were at the house before Selim Fawley died, or after?’

Smillet adjusted his spectacles, in doubt whether his friend were not still in the regions of delirium.

‘What made you think of that?’ he piped out at length. ‘It was before; of course,—an hour before! You must keep quiet, you know, and get well.’

But Sebastian was not to be denied, and so, in answer to his resolute inquiries, Smillet unfolded the following narrative.

‘When I got there, Fawley was talking to his wife very excitedly, and she was standing quietly listening to him. Just as I reached the door, Fawley put his hands to his throat and shrieked out some oath or other—poor fellow!—and fell back across a chair. Mrs. Fawley looked at him a moment, and then turned round and saw me. But Fawley con-

tinued to breathe for an hour afterwards. We took him into the blue chamber. She objected to calling the servants, lest they should talk some scandal; she thought then he would recover. No mother was ever so tender with her first baby as Mrs. Fawley was with that poor apoplectic creature. But when he died, an hour later, she sent me away, but asked me not to speak to any one about it. I have thought since then that Mrs. Fawley was a little thrown off her balance by the suddenness of the whole thing—a bit out of her right mind, you know. Well, then, the very next day I started for the Crimea at an hour's warning, that's all I know. Is Mrs. Fawley all right again?

‘I think so. I was wounded, wasn't I?’

‘Rather! You're to be sent home, and I'm going with you if you don't mind. But you can't start yet. And you'd better not talk any more.’

‘Who brought me in?’

‘That fellow Prout, who was with you in

London—you know! He was wounded himself, and is to get the medal, I've heard.'

Sebastian lay in seemingly placid meditation for awhile, and finally dropped asleep.

In a couple of weeks he was well enough to be moved, and proceeded by easy stages to Paris, where peace was to be signed a little later, and thence to London, Smillet accompanying him. They got to London in the morning, and here Smillet declared that he had business which would detain him overnight: so Sebastian proceeded alone, and that same afternoon he arrived safely at Cedarhurst vicarage. It was just dinner-time, and Mrs. Strome and Mary were at table, and Barbara Trench waiting. Sebastian was hungry and thirsty; and although he did not eat much dinner or drink much wine, and although the appetites of both the ladies were seriously impaired by his unexpected appearance, and although many

delays and hesitations and explanations intervened; nevertheless it may reasonably be believed that Sebastian's hunger was satisfied, and his thirst appeased, at last.

THE END.

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